

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S Mystery JUNE 2000 MAGAZINE

## BODY COUNT

"You might not be the only one he tried to ventilate," Jack said. "Maybe there's a group..."

RAYMOND STEIBER

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Plus...

Martin Limón

Reggie

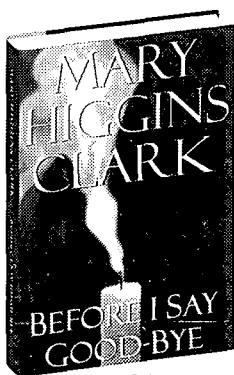
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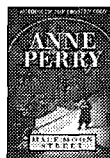
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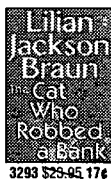
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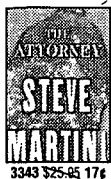
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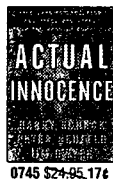
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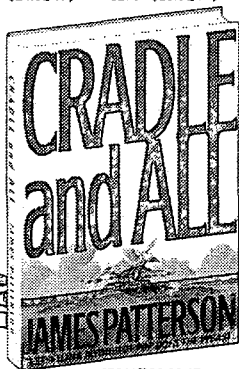
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 45, No. 6, June, 2000. Published monthly except for a July/August double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. Annual subscription \$33.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions, \$41.97 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 54011, Boulder, CO 80322-4011. Or, to subscribe, call 1-800-333-3311, ext. 4000. Editorial Offices: 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. Executive Offices: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT, and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260665. © 2000 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Reproduction or use, in any manner, of editorial or pictorial content without express written permission is prohibited. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to Transcontinental Sub. Dept., 525 Louis Pasteur, Boucherville, Quebec, J4B 8E7. GST #R123054108.

USPS:523-590 ISSN:0002-5224.

Printed in Canada

Cover by John Dawson

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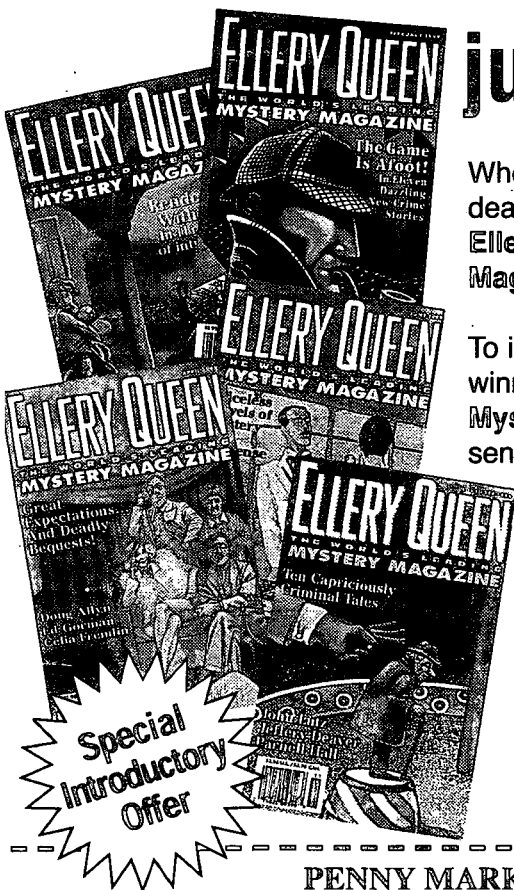
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# EDITOR'S NOTES

*Cathleen Jordan*

**G**eoffrey Hitchcock, a long-time AHMM author who lives in New Zealand, recently sent us a poem on the subject of writer's block that we think you'll like as much as we do:

## STARTING AGAIN

I haven't written for a while  
too many worries, too lazy perhaps  
always something else needs doing  
—you know how it is  
and now I come in here  
all eager to get going  
and find my silly old muse  
has gone to sleep on the processor  
and got herself all jammed up  
in the keys!

I'll have to work without her for a  
while  
I'm sure there must be lots to write  
about  
it's spring after all—  
a poet's favourite time.  
I could tell you about the tuis  
all day long in the kowhai tree

singing and gurgling and swearing  
away

while the sparrows chirp  
and the thrushes sing  
and it's all very jolly out there

but you know all about that.

Then the cherry trees  
putting on their profligate display  
breathtaking it is.

The tree in Mrs. Meliger's garden  
has grown so tall  
I walked past it without  
seeing the blossom!

But you can see all that for your-  
selves.

So come on, Musie dear,  
untwist your hair  
from the question mark  
and give me a hand,  
everything I think of  
has been said before

and much better.

---

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FICTION

# BODY COUNT



Raymond Steiber

*Illustration by M. Bilokur*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/00*

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**T**he colonel was at the top of the list, so he came first. His name was Christophe-Jean Borisot, and the sights of the long-range sniper's rifle lined up on him as he pattered among the rose-bushes of his back garden. He must have been eighty, his clothes hanging loosely on a body that had always been lean but age had made leaner still. A pensioner filling the sunset of his life with a lovingly cared-for garden. A glass of wine with dinner, a cigarette beside the fire before turning in with a book, perhaps a weekend visit from old colleagues.

So few years to take away from him, but take them away the watcher must because of the greater portion the man himself might have taken away.

The first shot kicked up a gout of earth at his knees. The old man reeled back, startled. How his ancient heart must be fluttering. He knew what it was, all right. He'd been in the game too long *not* to know. He scuttled sideways, somehow managed to get his feet under him, fled for the shelter of a potting shed.

But his aged legs were no match for the calm pull of the trigger, and the second shot flung him to the ground like a rag doll.

Wait for the news report on the radio. Make certain the deed had been truly done. Then take a marking pen and draw a black line through the first name on the list.

The woman had changed, but then everyone had changed. She'd gone matronly and now went un-

der the name of Magnusson. Zora Magnusson.

Once she'd been as luscious a bit of pastry as a skilled baker had ever frosted with sugar. The Stasi had used her to penetrate the bedroom, and the secrets, of a high West German official. But then the Stasi had eaten its way through West German counterintelligence with the unstoppable rapacity of a well-heeled rat. The old Bonn government might have inherited Germany's industrial skills, but when it came to espionage, the East had inherited everything else.

The SDECE had exposed her and turned her, and then they'd used her in the same way the Stasi had, but against a different clientele.

She'd been the lure, the only one of the five who was a certainty. And *he'd* struck like a careless old trout who never considered the consequences of his appetites.

Zora had been out of the game for more than a decade. She'd married twice, and each marriage had established her more securely in the upper regions of the middle class. Now she loaded her two young children in the back seat of a Volvo S80, carefully belted her ample body in the front, and drove off along the suburban avenue.

There was a park and above the park on a low hill a patch of woods. The Volvo climbed a road beside the wood, and from deep within a pair of binoculars watched it.

The binoculars settled on the tow-headed children in the back; the hands that held them made no move toward the rifle resting on the pine needles. The deed could wait.



It waited thirty-seven minutes while the Volvo delivered the children to a private school somewhat out of town and returned the same way it had gone.

At precisely the right moment the watcher in the wood put two rounds through the windshield. Two to be sure because the glass, after all, might deflect the path of the bullets. The Volvo burrowed into a ditch, turned turtle, and lay still under a leaden sky while its vital fluids puddled underneath.

Some minutes passed before anyone reacted, and in those minutes a small car in another street pulled away from the curb and disappeared into the morning gloom.

Lemereux was next although he didn't know it.

He was a solitary man in his mid-forties with the face of a cruel knight—the kind who in the early Renaissance had hired themselves out to Italian princelings and then, like as not, had taken over themselves and ruled with an iron fist. But the face didn't tell the whole story. It left out a sense of honor and a dogged sort of courage.

He lived on a boat because it suited him to change his surroundings from time to time. France and the Low Countries were crisscrossed by hundreds of canals, so a boat could be easily moved from one river to another, then tied up along a grassy bank for a season. The boat had been built by an eccentric just after World War II and, when the man had died, left to rot on a mudbank. Lemereux had picked it up for a song, spent a year making it sea-

worthy again, and begun his new life as a vagabond. It was a small craft, no more than twenty-five feet, with teak decks and an ancient but sturdy engine. Its living quarters consisted of a saloon area heated by a cast-iron stove, a diminutive toilet with shower, and a skylighted sleeping cabin forward.

It was early afternoon, and he'd left the boat for a walk through a nearby wood. His black Labrador scouted ahead of him through the dappled autumn sunlight. The dog had come to him as a stray the year before. It had been badly wounded in the shoulder by some unknown hand, and he'd tended it with no thought of keeping it but no thought of running it off either. And so by chance they'd become companions, each mute for different reasons about their dangerous pasts.

Lemereux was fit and lean and had the reflexes of a cat, and when the first shot came—and missed—he found instant cover. On the way down he gave the Labrador a slap on the rump and sent it howling into the forest. He didn't want it betraying his position because he was certain the first shot wouldn't be the last.

He wormed his way across the damp leaf-mold of the forest floor. A second shot came and seemed to sear the air along the back of his neck. He registered the shot but didn't let it distract him. He slithered more deeply into the foliage and went still. A tense fifteen seconds passed. Then he seemed to hear the faint shuffle of leaves up the hill to his right.

There was a dry streambed di-



rectly to his front. He carefully, an inch at a time, maneuvered himself into it; then he rose in a crouch, using the bank for cover. He could peer uphill now. He saw leaves, more leaves, a faint flicker of movement. He waited. The movement didn't repeat itself. He followed the streambed along the base of the hill. Then he climbed the bank and began working his way upward, using trees, bushes, indentations in the landscape for cover.

At the top he found the forked stick his assailant had used as a rifle rest. He found a spent cartridge half hidden in the foliage. And half a kilometer farther on, he found a tiretrack in the dirt of a seldom-used lane.

He was no Lecoq or Maigret, so the tiretrack told him nothing. Nor would it have told those gentlemen anything except that the vehicle that had made it was indistinguishable from a million others.

He'd been in this business a long while. He knew instinctively that the two shots had not been the random work of a madman. They'd been meant especially for him, and it was likely that others would follow in their wake—if he were foolish enough to expose himself to them.

He walked away through the woods. The advantage of Europe was that another village was never more than a few kilometers away. And that village would be served by reasonably frequent trains or buses. The dog would find its own way home. He'd call the local woman he'd hired to clean for him and ask her to feed it while he was away.

He was what the Americans called a loner, and no one else would miss him. Except perhaps the one who'd had him in his sights that afternoon.

He took a train to Toulouse, stayed the night, took another train to Périgueux in the Dordogne, or rather several trains, since there was nothing direct, boarded a bus for the small village of St.-Jean d'Astier. In a tobacconist's shop he made a phone call.

"Jack," he said, "it's Paul. I'm waiting in the village square."

A half hour later an ancient Citroën—the kind that looked like a gangster car—pulled up at the curb. It had been lovingly restored, and its black paint job gleamed in the afternoon sun.

Lemereux slipped into the passenger seat. Soon the Citroën was tooling down a narrow country lane bordered by walnut trees.

"You eaten yet?" the driver asked.

"Just coffee and a croissant."

"There's a farmer down the road from us who cures a wonderful ham. Danielle'll make us sandwiches, and we'll eat them out back of the house."

Danielle was Jack's wife—Jack Finzi to give him his full name. She was a handsome woman of some thirty-six years—but not so handsome as to cause Jack a lot of worry. Or at least no more than any wife caused a husband.

They had two daughters. They'd be in the village school just now, probably taking the endless dictation that was such a feature of the French educational system—as if everyone were training to be a stenographer. Lemereux had bolt-

ed the system as early as he could, roughnecked around awhile, then joined the army. There he'd shown a precocious aptitude for the arts of ambush and infiltration; and he'd been transferred to a more clandestine organization.

Jack turned into a winding driveway that ended in the yard of a charming old farmhouse made of stone. The farmhouse was set among the rugged Dordognese hills—hills where Cro-Magnons had stalked game at the end of the last ice age and left their paintings on cavern walls.

Danielle was in the kitchen. The floor was paved with stones that had been worn smooth by centuries of use. There was a large fireplace set in the back wall with iron hooks from which to hang cooking pots, but everything else in the kitchen was modern. There was even a microwave oven, though he couldn't imagine Danielle using it.

She glanced up as they entered and cast a look at Lemereux. She was a French-style redhead—which is to say not a redhead at all but somewhere between auburn and apricot—and had brown eyes.

"What wind brought you?" she asked.

She really meant what ill wind. Like all French housewives she jealously guarded her household from outsiders. It was said, not without some truth, that it was easier to get into a Frenchwoman's bed than her parlor.

He wanted to say the wind of a bullet passing within an inch of his brain but instead ignored the remark and trotted out the usual

cliche. "It's good to see you again, Danielle."

"And you, Paul." Though he was absolutely certain that she didn't mean it.

It was a fact, he decided, that wives seldom liked their husband's best friends. Was it jealousy at being excluded from some important corner of their spouses' lives? Lemereux had no way of knowing. He'd had only two or three brief liaisons, and as for the rest, it had been ladies of the night—as if he were a monk who once in a six-month succumbed to the temptations of the flesh and crossed the wall to visit some accommodating widow.

They repaired to a wooden table under a leafy tree. There was an arbor nearby that supplied the Finzis with table grapes—rich, luscious, and purple. In August, when the grapes ripened, the air hummed with the lazy flight of bees, so replete that they couldn't be bothered with stinging anybody. Danielle soon arrived with beer and sandwiches. Then she left them alone—but not without a troubled backward glance at their guest.

Jack drank his beer. Facially he resembled a certain American entertainer, the late Gene Kelly—a connection Lemereux had made only recently, since he had no interest in musicals. He'd gone a bit pudgy in recent years, but pleasantly so. Marriage suited him. So did his two daughters. He was perhaps the only man Lemereux had ever known who was perfectly happy. He claimed the secret was a French wife, and perhaps it was so. Amer-





ican men were easygoing in personal matters and, from a French perspective at any rate, tended to be harried by their demanding American wives. Frenchwomen on the other hand knew how to flatter a man's vanity. Lemereux liked it that his friend was happy, and he didn't want anything to diminish that happiness. There ought to be one person in the world who isn't pursued by demons, he thought, if only as a hope to the rest of us.

Jack said, "What up, Paul?"

"What makes you think something's up?"

"You didn't come here on an ordinary visit—I can tell that much."

"You read me like a book, Jack."

He pronounced Jack like the French Jacques.

"You've got a serious expression on your face."

"An ugly mug like mine always looks serious. But you're right. Somebody tried to ventilate me yesterday with a high-powered rifle."

He told Jack about the incident in the woods.

"Why haven't you gone to your former bosses about it?"

"But how do I know it wasn't one of them who hired the assassin?"

"Why would that be? It doesn't make sense."

"Since when did the bureaucrats of the secret world have to make sense? They need only convince themselves on the flimsiest of evidence that I'm a danger to them."

"Are you?"

"I've been out of the game five years, living modestly on my pension and certain investments I made with various bonuses. Everything I

know is out of date, and even if it weren't, I could easily be silenced by official edict. They don't have a First Amendment in this country, Jack. There's no hindrance to prior restraint."

"True enough, but what if you talked to someone in New York or London?"

"I wouldn't do it; you know I wouldn't. But they might believe I would. Or convince themselves that they believed. But to tell the truth, I don't think it's them either. I'm just being cautious."

"Who then?"

Lemereux raised his shoulders in a Gallic shrug.

"Some sort of revenge thing?"

"I don't know who. I don't know why."

"Did you ever do any wet work?"

"I was involved in several paramilitary operations. But assassinations? Never."

"What do you intend to do about this?"

"Put a stop to it. I don't mean to go around the rest of my life with my shoulders hunched."

"In any case, feel free to stay here till you get things sorted out."

"I'm depending on that super-efficient brain of yours to help me out, Jack."

Jack was a research specialist and not the kind that receives academic grants. He worked for governments and multinational corporations. "Get us the dope on this new finance minister in Malaysia. And what are the Russians planning to do about Siberian oil development?" The computer revolution had freed him from the tyranny of a desk job

and he'd been able to set up as a freelancer. He still had to flit here and there among the world's capitals and its hellholes. But the bulk of his time was spent here in Dordogne with his family.

He seemed to think about it. "Well, it's a problem, isn't it?"

He liked problems. He liked manipulating data till it spat out an answer. He had that type of mind.

"Do you think you can do anything?" Lemereux asked.

"Well, there are possibilities. One just hit me right now. Let's finish these sandwiches and go inside and warm up the old computer."

The computer screen created its own atmosphere in the shaded room. There was a desk lamp, but Jack hadn't turned it on. He liked the afternoon gloom. It was conducive to thinking.

He said, "The first thing to find out is if there are any others."

Lemereux raised his eyebrows.

"You might not be the only one this guy tried to ventilate," Jack continued. "Maybe there's a group, and maybe in the past you were a part of it. I need some names, Paul. People you worked with in hairy situations. Let's see if we can't put something together."

Lemereux coughed up some names. Jack accessed the Internet and scanned for hits. None of them rang any bells. None of them blew any whistles.

"All those names were French. What about foreigners you might have worked with? Even at one remove."

It took fifteen tries and forty-five

minutes before Lemereux came up with a name the computer recognized. And by then he'd gone back to French names.

Borisot, Christophe-Jean. At first it looked like another loser. That was because the initial hit was a potted biography. St. Cyr, service in North Africa, intelligence officer under Leclerc in World War II, various honors and decorations.

But there was a second hit, and this one was a news story from a three-week-old edition of the London *Daily Mail*—a curious place to find an item on a retired French army officer, but apparently Borisot had family connections in England.

"Edgar Wallace used to work for that rag," Jack said.

"Who's Edgar Wallace?"

"He invented King Kong."

"You and your movies, Jack."

"You ought to try them. I thought all Frenchmen were cinophiles."

"Not this one. Now show me what you've found."

He printed the story, then turned on the desk lamp so they could examine it.

"Looks like somebody else got the chop, Paul."

"But I barely knew this man. I only came up with his name because you were prodding me and it popped into my mind."

"You never worked with him?"

"Not at all."

"In that case let's come up with some other names you've never worked with."

Lemereux shook his head.

"I can't think of anyone but Zora Gerstein."



The grin that creased Jack's face was that of a fourteen-year-old.

"What a sweet potato that was. I better keep my voice down, though—in case Danielle's listening in the next room."

"You knew her?"

"Not as well as I would've liked. But then, who did but the clients she went to bed with? And they never knew the most important thing."

"That she was a Mata Hari."

"Her name's Magnusson now. I ran into her at the Frankfurt-Main airport a couple of years ago. She had a kid with her and had put on some weight, didn't know her at all. She came up and introduced herself—I guess because she was afraid I'd recognize her and say something she didn't want heard, even by strangers."

"Or by her child."

"Well she's a longshot, but let's see if we get a hit."

A few minutes later the grin had faded from Jack's face. He shook his head.

"It's a pattern, Paul. Two down, and you were meant to be number three."

"The question is how many more."

"No, the question is what's the connection."

But Lemereux already had a glimmer.

"Beirut. We were all there in the early eighties."

"You and Colonel Borisot and Zora Gerstein?"

"Not Borisot. But he was running things. That was what I heard, anyway."

"Heard from who?"

"Gallagra."

Jack tried the computer. "Nothing on him."

"Maybe they haven't got to him yet. Try Briant."

"The fat man."

"Careful—that description might fit you as well one of these days."

"A low blow, Paul. Remind me to spike your wine with vinegar tonight. Nothing on Briant either."

"Colonel Borisot the first week. Zora the second. Me the third. Perhaps Briant and Gallagra on the fourth and fifth."

"What happened in Beirut?"

"A perfect balls-up. As you know, France used to run Lebanon, and we still have important political interests. We were smuggling arms to one of the Christian leaders there—my group, that is. That was when it looked like Lebanon might divide into two separate countries—Christian and Muslim. In fact, for all practical purposes it already had. We were using the arms to buy influence with this man in hopes he might prove useful to us later. But another group that was being run by Borisot wanted to prevent the division and saw our man as an impediment. Naturally, no one was talking to anybody. We were each in the dark as to what the others were doing. In the end, someone up top caught wise to what was going on, flipped a coin, and decided to pull my group out. The Christian leader was dead within a week, with no visible effect either way. And a few years later the Syrians marched in and made it all academic."

"There's your revenge angle."

"Some mad gunman from Lebanon? But that's eighteen years

ago. And how would he know about me?"

"All right, let's try it from the other angle. Someone on this side wants you and the others silenced."

"Who are you talking about? Briant? Gallagra? That doesn't make any sense."

"It would if a higher-up were involved. Who called the shots on this deal?"

"I've no way of knowing. I was a field man. I received my orders at several removes."

"Suppose it's someone who's a big-name politician now. And suppose there's enough here to derail his career. Things you don't even know about."

"Politicians are capable of a lot of mischief. But multiple murders? It seems extreme."

"There's something here, all right. And if you don't want to spend the rest of your life in hiding, we'd better tease it out."

"Gallagra may know something. Or Briant. In any case, they both need to be warned."

"Got a line on either of them?"

"Gallagra, yes. He lives in Spain—in one of those fishing villages south of Barcelona that's suddenly sprouted high-rise hotels and turned into a resort. And maybe he can put us in touch with Briant."

"One of those two might be behind this, Paul."

"Gallagra, absolutely not. Briant, however—I wouldn't put anything past that pirate. You asked about wet work. He was up to his elbows in it. At one remove, of course. He never actually set the bombs or pulled the trigger."

"I only met him once. I can't say I liked him much. My wallet kept itching as if it thought he might make a grab at it. But maybe I'm misjudging him."

"A little, perhaps. Not much. The more I think of it, the more his possible involvement troubles me."

"We need to get to this Gallagra. Maybe he'll know something."

"We could drive there in under eight hours, Jack. If you're willing, of course. Or I could borrow one of your cars and go on my own."

"We'll go together. This thing's sort of got my juices up."

Danielle didn't like it. She shot black looks at Lemereux all through dinner. But in the morning they left in Jack's car anyway.

Gallagra's wife or lover—they never did get it straight—had a sour mouth in a sour face. But maybe they'd caught her at a bad time and on other occasions she was ravishing.

"He went hunting with his pals," she informed them. "Six days now and not a word from him!"

Gallagra had a certain reputation, and maybe she was wondering if he'd found a temporary substitute for herself. Or worse, a permanent one.

Jack gave her a winning American smile. "Yeah? What sort of game were they after?"

"They went birding. He was to meet them up there. But you can bet they're spending more time in the taverns than in the fields."

"Where's this place at?" Jack asked.

The woman gave them the name





of the village near which Gallagra and his friends usually hunted. "They've got an arrangement with a farmer up there. Why do you ask?"

"Maybe we'll cut up that way and catch him in one of those taverns you mentioned."

"If you see him, tell him to call me," she said a little desperately. "He *never* calls me."

The village was in a remote area of the hills, and the road that led to it twisted upwards through hairpin curves. Jack nursed the Citroën along. The much-overhauled engine was still good, but it had a lot of miles on it and tended to lose power on steep grades.

Jack said, "I wonder if Gallagra's our boy."

"You mean you wonder if his woman can tell the difference between a birding gun and a rifle."

"Something like that."

"In which case we won't find him in this village—or his supposed friends either."

"Oh they might be there. It's just that he'll be absent. Or newly returned."

"I've known him a long time, Jack. It's hard to believe he'd get himself involved in an assassination spree. But if your theory's right about a higher-up being in charge, I suppose he might have been pressured into it."

"He killed in Beirut."

"The group he was part of killed. And the hit was sanctioned."

"You and Colonel Borisot and Zora Gerstein might have been sanctioned, too."

"For a contented man you offer an awfully bleak outlook, Jack."

"My scalp's not on the line. So I can offer bleak outlooks and still be contented."

They arrived in the village early in the afternoon. It had obviously been bypassed by the economic revolution that had swept Spain in recent years. Dusty and shuttered, with only the occasional black-clad elderly woman moving along its narrow lanes, it reminded Lemereux more of Franco-era Spain than the modern country.

They made inquiries in the local tavern. The hunters had been there all right, drinking and playing cards and making rude jokes, but they'd left two days ago.

They slid back into the front seat of the Citroën.

Lemereux said, "Two full days and Gallagra hasn't yet returned to his lady friend—or called her either."

"Maybe he decided to ditch her."

"I have another idea. Drive back the way we came, but do it more slowly."

"It'll be downhill this time. I'll have to use the brakes."

"Then use them, Jack."

"What's this idea of yours?"

But Lemereux had gone quiet and thoughtful, and his only answer was "Something I thought I saw on the way up."

They drove in silence for the next eight or ten miles. Then Lemereux reached out and touched Jack's shoulder.

"Stop the car," he said.

They'd come to the top of a hill. Jack pulled over and set the brake.

"What is it?"

But Lemereux had already

slipped out of his seat and was striding toward the verge. Jack climbed out and joined him. The narrow valley below was choked with vegetation, the same kind of thick-running *maquis* that you found in southern France and Corsica. Now Jack saw what Lemereux had seen. A kind of broken tunnel in the *maquis* and the gleam of metal deep within it.

They skidded down the slope on the heels of their shoes, sending rocks and pebbles before them. Jack did the last ten yards on his rump, but neither of them made a joke about it. Things had turned too serious for that.

The car that had plowed down the slope into the *maquis* was a German-made Ford. They had to rip away foliage to get a look at the passenger compartment. The windshield had shattered, leaving shards of rock-candylike glass on the front seat and in the lap of the driver. And there *was* a driver. He gazed at them balefully with three eyes, the off-center third one located on the left side of his forehead. On its way out the bullet that had made it had ballooned the back of his head.

Jack gasped a breath. "Is it Gallagra?"

"I'm not sure."

Because of what the bullet had done to the face. Because of what the crash had done. And because of the many days that had passed since it had all happened.

Lemereux had to crawl inside and relieve the corpse of his billfold. They examined it in the sunlight.

Jack said, "Gallagra, all right. Correction to our previous theory.

He was number three. You were meant to be number four."

"And how many others? Many? A few? We'd better get to Briant in a hurry," Lemereux said, "or there'll be no one left to talk to."

They pulled over at the first phone box they came to and called an anonymous tip in to the police. Then they headed out again. They crossed the border into France two hours later and spent the night in Perpignan. Then they set about the business of tracking down the current whereabouts of Briant. It took five phone calls but they were finally successful, and in the morning they drove on to Marseille.

Briant ran an import-export business from a seedy warehouse near the harbor.

"Papa César territory," Jack commented as they made their way on foot along the street.

"Another of your movie characters, Jack?"

"One of yours, actually. From the 1930's."

"Too early for me. I wasn't born yet. In here, I think."

They cut through a pair of open doors where a truck was offloading a cargo of oblong wooden boxes.

"What do you think?" Jack asked. "Automatic rifles?"

"The lettering on the sides says machine parts—which is probably what they are. But maybe on another shore they'll be switched for automatic rifles and then continue on to their destination. It's Briant after all. He's certainly not into anything legal."

They mounted a rickety wooden

staircase at the back. In a dingy office at the top they found the bleak-eyed woman who doubled as Briant's secretary and his accountant. There was another office at the back, and after certain representations from Lemereux they were admitted to it.

There was a laptop computer on the desk that its user quickly closed as they entered. The laptop looked new—which probably meant Briant had bought it from a receiver of stolen goods. He was not known to be freehanded where money was concerned.

He started to rise, realized he was in no immediate danger, and subsided again. His suit, which looked old enough to be secondhand, hung on him as if he'd recently lost weight. But his face was still that of a fat man. The skin was sallow than Lemereux remembered and the whites of his eyes more yellow. Maybe he'd recently been ill.

"Claude," Lemereux said.

"How clever—you remembered my name. Too bad you didn't remember to knock also. How did you get in here?"

"Your secretary admitted us."

"My assistant," Briant corrected. "And she should have known better."

"We persuaded her that you'd be glad to see us."

"Then you persuaded her wrongly. Whatever your business is, state it and get out."

"No offer of a drink, Claude?"

The offer of anything so costly as even a cheap glass of wine would have choked him, and his face showed it.

"Not for you. And not for this person you've brought with you."

"Jack Finzi," Jack said. "But maybe you don't remember me."

"Should I have a reason to?"

He turned his attention back to Lemereux. "Why have you come?"

"Remember Colonel Borisot, Claude?"

Briant raised a soft hand off the desktop, let it fall again.

"What about Zora Gerstein?"

"I met her once."

"Once? You worked with her in Beirut. She was your bait."

"That's not proved," Briant said.

"And what about Andre Gallagra? I know you knew him."

"Are you going to go through the entire inventory of my friends?"

"Acquaintances, Claude. I don't believe you have any friends."

"And you, Lemereux. How many do you have?"

It was a neat shot, but Lemereux shrugged it off. "You'd better hope I'm one of yours, Claude. Because each of those people I've mentioned has recently died."

"I'm not surprised in the case of Colonel Borisot. He was very old."

"Yes, and they put a round through his head to make sure he wouldn't get any older."

Briant's eyes grew hooded.

"Someone killed him? Too bad. Not that I'll shed any crocodile tears."

"And Zora Gerstein. And Andre Gallagra. Same weapon, too. A high-powered rifle probably equipped with a sniper scope."

Briant's expression didn't change.

"Doesn't it bother you?" Lemereux pressed.



"Why should it?"

"Three deaths. Five shots."

"An amateur, then. A professional would only have taken three. He wouldn't use a high-powered rifle either unless the situation actively demanded it. A small cheap handgun equipped with a silencer and disposed of immediately after use. You approach your target on a dark street or somewhere in a crowd. The merest popping sound and you've given the target the six." The six was slang for an execution-style killing. "You know how it's done," Briant finished.

"But I don't, Claude. I never did wet work. And as for giving people the six, the next number may be yours."

Briant's eyes closed down, slitted open again.

"Why do you say that?"

"Borisot. Gallagra. Gerstein. Who completes the circle but you?"

"If you're talking about Beirut, that's ancient history."

"Who gave you the order for the hit there?"

Briant eyed him silently.

"Is he still your protector? Is that why you're able to move the goods you do? And don't think for a moment I don't know what they are. Certainly not what's labeled on those crates downstairs."

"I'm a legitimate businessman."

"What if this person's grown tired of you? What if he sees you as a danger to his future interests?"

"You're spinning daydreams, Lemereux. Get out and take your friend with you."

"I've hit on something, haven't I?"

"You told me that I didn't have

friends. But I do have friends. And if you interfere with me, they'll make great trouble for you."

"Be careful, Claude. I just might wring your neck. And be careful of that other, too. The one with the sniper's rifle."

As they went down the stairs, Jack said, "Well what do you think?"

Lemereux shook his head. "I don't know. I can't be sure. And that's the trouble."

They hashed it out while they ate fish stew in a waterfront dive. The stew was excellent—a Marseille specialty—but you wouldn't want to visit the kitchen where it had been made.

Jack said, "He could be working in collusion with this higher-up we've speculated on."

Lemereux frowned. "I can't puzzle it out, Jack. Something's missing. And if tomorrow Briant turns up dead, we'll never know what it is."

"I just had a terrible thought, Paul. What if we've been lured here? Or more accurately *you've* been lured. What if the idea is to tie you to each of these killings and then finish the knot with Briant? If you had to, could you provide an alibi for the time when Borisot was killed? Or Gallagra? Or Gerstein?"

He shook his head. "I doubt it."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you're a solitary. If you lived with someone, if you played bowls every Sunday on the village green with your wine-slurping pals, you'd be in the clear. But that not being so, how much would it take to make you the fall guy in this business?"





"Not much. But don't expect me to take up bowls to get out of it. That's too much of a sacrifice."

Lemereux took a forkful of stew, put it down again.

"There might be something in that office of his," he said. "Perhaps he even leaves his laptop there, locked in a desk drawer."

"I doubt it."

"If I managed to get hold of it, could you break the access codes?"

"I could try."

"Then it's settled. Tonight I'll go in through the back window."

"What if he's got an alarm back there?"

"You're forgetting what a miser Briant is. Alarm systems cost money."

"What if there's a late shipment and the building's occupied?"

"All the better so long as Briant himself is not there. I'll pull a workman's cap over my eyes and walk right in the front door."

"I don't know, Paul."

"Are you with me or not? Otherwise I do it alone."

"What would my part be?"

"You sit in the Citroën on a nearby street, and if things go wrong step on the gas and whisk me away."

"I still don't like it, but all right. Now, eat your stew so you'll have enough energy to run if you have to."

There was an old church in a small square just uphill from Briant's warehouse. The steeple rose obliquely upward from the crowded rooftops of the adjoining buildings. Jack pulled the Citroën up to

the curb opposite and cut the engine. There were a couple of other cars nearby, so at least he wouldn't stand out.

Lemereux slipped out of the passenger seat, then leaned back in.

"I estimate it will take me no more than half an hour."

"I'll set my alarm clock."

"And wake the entire neighborhood? Just check your magic wrist-watch from time to time."

Lemereux moved off into the gloom. He thought again how good it was to have a friend like Jack. Briant had hit the mark. He had far too few of them. But at least the ones he had were to be relied upon.

He had some difficulty in finding the narrow lane that ran behind Briant's office. And when he did, it was more by chance than design. The office was on the uphill side of the warehouse, so its single window was no more than a few feet off the ground. As Lemereux approached it, he was surprised to see that a light still burned inside. It was after eleven. Briant should be home counting his pennies. But maybe the light was only there to discourage burglars.

He approached the window cautiously. He was not, after all, a second story man. He had neither the skill nor the patience to jimmy locks in silence. He'd simply tape over a pane, break it out with the blunt end of his knife, and reach through for the latch. As for the desk, if it were locked, brute force would take care of that, too.

He flattened himself against the dirty stonework and peered around the edge of the window. At first all



he saw was the empty office. Then his eyes fell on the door that led out of it. It was shut, and there was a splash on it that looked very much like blood.

He changed his position. Now he could look directly into the room. Briant lay sprawled in front of the door in a pool of blood. After he'd been hit, he'd tried to claw his way out of the room. But he hadn't made it, and now he was a shrunk corpse inside his ill-fitting suit.

Lemereux raised his eyes. There was a single round hole in the uppermost pane. A pistol would have smashed the glass. A modern assault rifle with its tumbling rounds would have done the same. Only a bullet from a high-powered rifle, moving with tremendous velocity, could have put a hole in glass like that.

But where had the assassin stood? Not in the alleyway, that was certain. Lemereux turned and raised his eyes to the low rooftop opposite. Because of the steepness of the roof the assassin would have had to curl there with one foot braced against the gutter. Then waited, who knew how long, for Briant to present himself at the window. No other shot was possible from that angle—unless the assassin merely wanted to hit Briant in the knee.

An amateur. Just as Briant had proclaimed. Because in these close dark streets a professional would have used a handgun. Then disappeared.

Lemereux blinked his eyes. He was more in the dark than ever. And more afraid. He headed back

for the car, keeping carefully to the shadows.

Jack was half asleep behind the wheel when the woman knocked on the window of the Citroën. He was thinking about Danielle and how lucky he had been to make her his wife. He didn't deserve someone like her. He wasn't Joe Athlete and he wasn't Joe Handsome either. And to have her look so good after bearing two children—but maybe he was the only one who saw her that way. Lucky him then. Blessed him.

The rapping brought his head up from the seat back. The woman stood on the street side of the car. She was frumpy and middle-aged. She had a scarf over her hair and wore the kind of black garb Jack associated with older European women. Country women mostly who appeared to be in perpetual mourning. Her face was in the light, and her eyes were like great sorrowful wounds. Women in certain religious paintings had eyes like that as they wept at the feet of the crucified Christ.

He wondered who she was and what she wanted and rolled down the window to find out. And that was when she raised her right hand and showed him the ugly little black automatic.

Jack was too startled to do anything but stare. She opened the car door and motioned him out. He got out with a total sense of unreality, like a man taking the first wispy steps into a nightmare.

If this had been one of those movies he liked, he would've suddenly



spun and delivered a karate kick to her wrist and caught the pistol before it hit the cobblestones. But he knew no such moves, and besides, this was reality and he'd never have time to execute the business before she pulled the trigger on him. No special cameras to speed up the action here. No well-trained actors to react to blows that never really landed.

He found his voice. "What is this?" Realized that he'd spoken in English and that she didn't understand.

She motioned with the pistol. "*Eglise.*"

Church. She wanted him to cross the square to the church.

I don't think this is the approved way to recruit new Christians, he thought wildly.

He obeyed anyway.

*What is this? Who was she?*

They came to the stone steps out front. They'd been worn down by a couple of centuries of parishioners. That was how old the church was. That was how old this district was.

At her urging he climbed them to the tall wooden door at the top. When he reached it, he saw that it was slightly ajar.

They went inside.

Dim, flickering candles lit the interior. He had the feeling she'd lit them herself in advance.

The door creaked closed. She motioned him to one side. He saw the ropes of a bellpull hanging down. He saw narrow, wooden steps leading upward. They'd end in the belfry three stories above. Was that where she intended to take him? But instead she whispered a single word. "*Arrêtez.*" Stop.

He turned to face her. Couldn't help himself really. Better in the front than in the back. Or was it better?

The flickering candlelight.

Those wounded eyes. The frozen mouth.

She raised the pistol and shot him quite deliberately in the chest.

It was as if a gigantic fist had struck him. He was flung back against the wall, then to the stone floor.

I'm shot, he realized in a bewildered way.

Then: I'm dying. Is that true? *Am I?*

He heard wood creak. He dimly realized that it was the woman climbing the winding staircase to the belfry.

He was gasping through his mouth, and frothy blood formed on his lips.

Belfry, he thought. It's her. She's the one and the rifle's up there and when Lemereux comes, she'll add his name to the rest.

Then the pain hit and unmanned him.

The rifle was already assembled and sitting in a corner of the belfry. She had to circle the great bell to get to it. When the shot had sounded below, it had vibrated sympathetically, sending out a distant ringing echo like a wind chime.

She picked up the rifle and jacked a round into the chamber. Then she stood beside one of the openings in the belfry and examined the lighted square below. She was not an especially fine shot—she'd win no prizes. But she was an able one, and so far



her targets had been easy. No more than eighty yards for the worst of them.

Her brother had taught her—rifle and pistol both. If they come, he'd said, it's better you shoot them than they shoot you.

He'd meant their enemies on the other side of the Green Line. The Lebanese Muslims—or the more fanatical ones at any rate. But in the end it had been someone else he had to fear—a blonde European temptress and the gunsights into which she'd led him.

She'd been the firstborn, but he was the first male, the prime around which the entire household had circled like inferior planets. She was twelve years his senior and even then knew she was destined never to marry, and so when he was young, she'd treated him like the child she'd never have. When he'd become a man, they'd almost been like lovers—not in the physical sense but in the closeness of their relationship. I'm more important to him than that shallow wife he's married, she'd always thought. Yes, it's true, and even *she* knows it.

He'd been a big man, well set up and ruggedly handsome. Women adored him, and he'd never refused to take their favors. She'd hated him for that, as if it were she he was betraying and not his wife. But she'd also felt a fierce pride. See what a *man* he is, see how no woman can resist him. And so when the bullet had ripped his life away it had been easy for her to turn him from a surrogate husband-son into a martyr. She'd even set up a kind of shrine

in her bedroom with votive candles burning before his gilt-framed photograph.

A great sorrow burned within her. Yes, *burned*. And she wondered what she'd do when this night was finished and her mission was complete. Would her soul turn to ashes? Or would she finally know a kind of peace?

She was sorry about the man below. There had been something kind about his eyes, his face. But she couldn't let him stand in her way. Not when she was so close to having her revenge. There'd been five, five on the list she'd obtained through bribery and intimidation. And now here was the last.

A moving shadow in the mouth of the street opposite. She brought the stock of the rifle to her cheek. It caressed her skin like the lover she'd never known.

Lemereux coming to the square and somehow sensing that something was wrong. But not sensing it strongly enough to be deterred.

And Jack Finzi in the church struggling to his feet.

Riven with pain. His lungs working like a broken engine. Sweat coursing down his face despite the coolness of the night. Everything out of focus, everything around him and beneath him swaying dangerously. Individual candle flames dividing in two and mocking him.

He was moaning and sobbing and didn't realize it. His jacket front was stained with blood, and blood dribbled down his chin.

He managed a single croaked word: "Danielle."



Calling on her to help him. But she was far away.

Up above the woman at last lining Lemereux up in her sights. Not entirely sure of his identity yet. Waiting for him to step into the light.

And Lemereux suddenly glancing up at the belfry, but not seeing her because of the way she stood back in the darkness.

Jack sensed her up there in the belfry. Gape-mouthed and groaning, he knew what she was about to do.

Bells. *The bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling, they ring for you not me*

...

Lemereux advancing into the light of the square. Lemereux's face in the crosshairs. She began to gentle the trigger.

And down below Jack Finzi lunged forward and grabbed the thick, rough bell rope and fell forward with it.

The immense *clang* of the bell. She jerked the trigger in response. The bullet spattered off the cobblestones, and Lemereux dived behind a parked car.

Down below Jack continued to cling to the bell rope. It yanked him upward as the bell swung on its pivot, then came down again with his weight.

*Never send to know for whom the bell tolls* . . .

She was trapped in the belfry, trapped within the huge sound of the great pealing bell. It tore at her ears, her brain. She dropped the rifle. She screamed—and the sound of the bell ate it up as if it were nothing.

She had to get out. She had to

find her way down the twisting stair. Her eardrums felt as if they'd collapsed. Her inner ears were twisted in pain.

And Jack down below riding up and down on the bell rope like a bloody, demented Quasimodo.

The awful *clang*.

She screamed again.

Plunged blindly toward the stair.

And stepped into the empty maw where the bell hung.

Jack let go of the bell rope, sliding in his own blood. The floor came up to meet him. He gripped it with his fingernails, afraid that it would cast him off. And whispered Danielle's name again, terrified that it would be the last time he would hear it.

There were tubes everywhere. One in his nose to get oxygen into his lungs. Others in his arms to hydrate him with saline solution and feed him with glucose. And most blessed of all, the one that dribbled painkiller into his veins.

Even so, it hurt every time his chest moved up and down. But it was the hurt of recovery, or so he hoped.

Lemereux had brought him a basket of fruit that would spoil before he was in a condition to eat it. Poor Lemereux. He just didn't know about these things.

He was at the bedside. He said, "Danielle's on her way, Jack. She wanted to drop everything and drive but I convinced her to take the train. The state she was in, I was afraid she'd have a wreck."

Jack wanted to tell him that she was stronger than that. But only a single syllable came out. "When?"





"She'll be here this afternoon at the latest. I finally talked to my former bosses, by the way. If I'd done that in the first place, probably none of this would've happened. So when you climb out of that bed, I'll stand perfectly still while you punch me in the face."

"I'm floating. Probably won't remember a word you say. But tell me about it anyway."

"She was a relative of the one Briant had killed in Beirut. They found a list on her body with five names on it. Four of them crossed out and mine just waiting. And here's the ironic part—none of us was the one who'd actually pulled the trigger. It was some anonymous Lebanese gunman Briant hired who's now

disappeared into the dust of history. He probably emigrated and sells computers in Los Angeles.

"She was out for revenge of course—blood for blood—you know how these Lebanese families can be. Strange that such a male-dominated group should send a woman, but maybe she took the job on herself. Anyway, thanks to you, she missed her last target. So that leaves just one question—whether or not your wife will brain me for getting you shot."

Jack thought a moment, then answered in a thick voice. "She'll probably brain you."

"In that case," Lemereux said, "I think I'll wait before I visit you at the farm again."

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FICTION

# JUST WONDERFUL

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*Illustration by Bill Kalpakoglou*

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*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/00*

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**I**t starts with a pronouncement: "Crazy is back!"

At this particular time I am minding my own business in Donny Rumano's place, which is of course the Westbrook Hotel, chewing the fat with Elsie, who's ambled out of her Kitchen Nook and into the bar for a glass of milk. We are exchanging views about not very much when who should push through the door but a guy from upstairs named Wonderful, and the minute Wonderful fastens his orbs on me, that's it, he pads straight for me like a police dog.

He clamps a mitt on me and steers me to a dark table, watching the street door as if he expects it to open at any minute and produce his worst nightmare.

Now, Wonderful is a person you don't want to sit at a dark table with, or even a table in the bright sunshine, for he is the kind of guy who will always find something to gripe about no matter what and is therefore a great drag on the spirit. If you ask him, "How is it going?" he replies, "Oh, just wonderful!" and then commences imparting things about his personal experience that will wring tears from a brick. After which he tries to spring some dollars out of you.

Wonderful is a thin man, perhaps the thinnest you will ever see. He is always thin since I first meet him, so thin that a clothes-hanger fills out a shirt better than he does. Perhaps he's thin because he never eats anything but only puffs cigarettes and sips gin when these commodities are to be had free of charge. He has a thin voice and a thinning

pompadour but large wrist muscles and the hands of a strangler.

"Crazy is back!" he says, so I don't have time to ask him how things are going but only to respond, "Crazy Nate?," at which he bobs his head, plucks a cadged cigarette out of his shirt pocket (it must be cadged because it isn't in a packet), lights it with trembling fingers, and proceeds to explain the situation.

His troubled state is understandable. He has made an enemy. Some months earlier Crazy Nate Prima suddenly becomes the number one guy on the local constables' wish list and has to beat it from the scene in a hurry. For some unclear reason Crazy blames Wonderful for this embarrassment. He makes it clear he will return one day to set the matter straight, and now it appears as if that day has come.

Which means that for once Wonderful has something worth worrying about, Crazy being a true menace, partial to knives, possessing more of those items than you will find at a Chicago meat carvers' convention and carrying many of them about with him at all times so that a clanking sound emanates from his person.

Naturally, Wonderful is behaving as if he would trade his large wrists for longer legs with which to rush away on, Crazy giving no thought to legs but only to rib cages, which he pokes holes in on numerous occasions.

"And why does he blame you," I ask him, "for his difficulties?"

"I have no idea."

A grave matter. I am tempted to advise Wonderful that it may be

best to leg it hastily from the town, but despite his apprehension I know that this is something he will not consider, for he is one of those characters who never strays more than five miles from his door. He wouldn't know where to leg it to, or what leg to start off on if he did.

So I suggest that he lie low for the rest of the day with a pot of coffee, his door locked and his curtains drawn. In the meantime I will go forth and attempt to learn what the game is and what cards are dealt.

But I'm not pleased about it, for Wonderful is no great chum of mine. Nor is Crazy Nate, for that matter. In fact I am certain that Crazy would not hesitate to treat my rib cage as he would treat Wonderful's. All the same, I feel I should help, which is a weakness of mine that gets me into some jams.

Before dealing with Crazy, I must consult with someone in the know. It being just past the lunch hour, I'm sure that I will find Tommy Hightops at his post, Hightops being a guy who runs the Ooh La La sports bar for a very big noise in the area by the name of La-La Lloyd LaDuc. Hightops is what might be called a lieutenant of La-La's and is therefore well-versed in the who's-who and the what's-what of things, it being part of his job to keep abreast of current events at this end of the street.

At the Ooh La La there are a few loogans hanging about, though the lunch crowd has buzzed off. Hightops perches on a stool at his cash drawer, totting up the proceeds of a successful lunch hour. I assume

that it's been successful, for he has got a wad of bills in his hand that would choke a water buffalo and an exceptionally greedy water buffalo at that. He is a small guy wearing trendy sports garb that is more costly than a tailored suit, and on his feet are his usual pair of bright, white, high-topped gym shoes.

When I mention my chat with Wonderful, the state Wonderful is in, and how on his behalf I have undertaken to learn what Nate Prima's intentions are, Hightops does not change his poker face or even glance up from his cash but only snorts a very loud snort.

"Nate Prima? Crazy Nate? Does he know himself what his intentions are? I think Crazy never knows what he is doing until after he does it, which is why he is in and out of the slam like a cuckoo bird popping in and out of a clock."

"True," I say, faced with the fact of this, "but maybe you know what he *thinks* his intentions are."

"Oh well, that is another matter. In fact I have heard a few things. It seems he thinks he is going to slice somebody, though who that somebody is, I do not know. Maybe it's Wonderful. Maybe it's somebody else. You have to wait for it with Crazy, as nothing is ever what you think it will be with that guy."

This doesn't sound wise to me.

"If Wonderful waits around to get sliced, then on account of the holes in him it will be too late to do much."

"Maybe," replies Hightops, "but then it won't be your problem."

This is a feature of Tommy Hightops that sets him apart from guys like Wonderful. By this I mean his

ability to see the bright side of things.

"Well," I say, "maybe you can spell out for me just what the situation is between Wonderful and Crazy when Crazy does the dash out of town because for my part I only heard rumors . . ."

"Ah, rumors." He gives a sniff as if rumors are something he never trusts unless they begin with him. "You heard that the constables were onto Crazy at about that time regarding a certain marketing ploy?"

"Well . . ."

"And that this certain ploy is a most lucrative one—by Crazy's standards—netting him some weighty cash flows and piling up for him the old mazuma?"

"I never heard that exactly."

"Ah well, now you have."

"And what is this ploy?"

"Oh, nothing much. Only a small push that brings him into the telemarketing game." Hightops has been rolling wadded bills up in rubber bands the whole time he is talking to me, and now he shoves them into a canvas bag which has three big L's imprinted on it. He bangs his cash drawer shut. Bag in hand, he slips from his stool and pads for the office, which is behind a screen. I trot after him, puzzled.

"This is most surprising to me," I say to the back of Hightops' baseball cap, which is actually the front of his baseball cap being that he wears it turned around on his head like a ying-yang, "since the last I hear Crazy Nate is into some kitchen cutlery effort. Knife-a-Slice, I believe he calls it. As you say, you can't always tell with him, but I personally

see the telemarketing game as a highly technical wheeze, and I am never aware that Crazy Nate is what could be called a technoid, not to say a nerd-person, or a propeller head."

"He is not a nerd-person. He is not a propeller head. He does not know the difference between a telephone network and a duck's kado-die. But he knows a fast game when he finds one, and he found one this time and jumped right into it. He jumped quick, he was so impressed. It was illuminating to him that telemarketing can be more lucrative than peddling butcher knives."

This is all very understandable, but in one respect Hightops gets beyond me here. I don't see how Crazy Nate can run a telephone network. I don't see how he can understand one. Also I am wondering how it puts me closer to learning why he has the boot on for poor old Wonderful. But Hightops has got going on this nail and keeps hammering at it.

"Crazy has no network, no banks of computer screens, only a single phone, but he discovers that one can scam very nicely with that and knock up customers five a minute instead of one an hour, which is how it is when you lug an assortment of kitchenware along the pavements, wearing out shoe leather like a three-legged cop. The telemarketing angle truly appeals to him."

Hightops opens a safe door as thick as a headstone and bungs the bag inside. Then he slams the door and gives the dial a spin.

"Crazy's dodge is this. He phones up retirees—fine folks, lonely and



glad to talk—and he offers these seniors a chance to win a big fat prize if they will but register for a vacation in coconut land at a low, low price not to be encountered ever again on this earth. As Crazy tells them, they can only hold a bunk on this opportunity by providing their particulars, most especially their credit card numbers.”

“Ah,” I say, seeing where this leads.

“Now, the next day Crazy calls these same chumps once again, this time to tell each one of them that they alone have won the draw. Of course they are extremely delighted. But he says that in order to verify that they are in fact who they claim to be, they must impart to him their Social Security number for an identity check, which, believe it or not, most gladly do.

“But of course there is no prize, no vacation, no low, low price. Only a mooch list which Crazy pegs away at until he has got enough suckers jotted down on it to sell it at a high, *high* price, which he does. I hear that at his peak he knocks out a dozen mooches per week and sells each one of them nine times over.”

Now a mooch, or mooch list, is of great value to certain persons, being a sort of directory of folks who have shown themselves amenable to being jobbed, which is to say people loose with their mazuma. A mooch with credit card numbers is desirable, and one with Social Security numbers on it as well is not only desirable but especially prized. Hightops steers me out of the office, talking.

“But Crazy makes errors. He does

not do his homework. He does not appreciate that this is a most risky wheeze.” He stops to eyeball me. “A wheeze so risky that Crazy finds he should have stuck to his sausage slicers.”

There is a cold light in Hightops’ eye.

“So . . . what you are telling me—I am not quite sure how to put this—is that he was perhaps edging into someone else’s concern?”

“I would not tell you anything along those lines.”

I shrug. “So what happens next?”

“He attracts attention, of course. The phone police zero in, and as you know they are very tough puppies, tougher than customs officials, which is saying something. They are keen to learn Crazy’s whereabouts so that they can tap his line, or whatever it is they do, and they post a reward for information that will lead to the arrest and—*da-dee, da-dah*. So when it is noticed Wonderful comes up flush on the very day these clue-boys knock down Crazy’s door, a certain conclusion is drawn.”

I am beginning to feel miffed at Wonderful. He has not mentioned that he comes up flush on that day.

Hightops clambers back onto his stool, and I am about to leave when he asks me if I am going to see Crazy Nate.

“That’s the plan.”

“And where is he at?”

“I don’t really know. I only know that he’s looking for Wonderful, so I am assuming that he’s not far off.”

Hightops throws me a stiff look.

“Before you pursue this further, take some advice: make sure you

are fitted out in your boilerplate undershirt. What I am telling you is this is hazardous territory, Crazy being, well, crazy, producing much turmoil and many commotions, and numerous rhubarbs of all descriptions. On top of that—" he pauses here to stress the gravity of his next words "—Wonderful himself may be difficult. I know for a fact he has made a recent acquisition. A handgun that will knock a hole through a cement truck lengthwise."

This last bit is astonishing, for Wonderful never packs any iron.

"And how does he acquire this howitzer?"

"The usual way, I would imagine. He consults the official registered weapons inventory—numerous copies of which can be found on the street as you know—selects an address which has what he needs, and makes a housecall. Of course while there he can pick up plenty of rounds as well. One-stop shopping."

"Thanks for the tip."

"Do not mention it."

Then I beat it out of the place.

Hoofing it back along the pavements, I puzzle at how Hightops comes by this knowledge. I never know him to be wrong, but his information is hard to digest. As I point out, Wonderful is no gunman, though I suppose there is a first for all things. But neither is he a break-and-enter man, so if he did decide to acquire a piece, it is more likely that he would acquire it retail, whatever the cost, from a guy like, say, Java-Joe the Dutchman, or maybe Smiling Otis Sweets.

Clearly I have to learn what else

Wonderful hasn't told me before I tackle Crazy Nate, so I beat it back to the Westbrook to subject Wonderful to a Q and A.

I am startled to find that Wonderful's door is not latched. This despite my advice to him that morning. Smelling trouble, I poke my nose inside. The room is murky. I see a form on the bed. "Wonderful?" I say, thinking he is asleep. I edge closer. And then I freeze. The form before me is draped in a sheet, and that sheet has got holes in it that you can shine a flashlight through. Startled, I leg it back down the stairs.

In the lobby I steady myself, my thoughts racing. What does it mean? Has Crazy come and gone? I am concerned for Wonderful, naturally, but naturally also concerned for myself. It is not advisable to arrive first at such scenes, the authorities taking a dim view of it.

Then I wonder if those holes are bullet holes. I wonder if possibly they are made by a knife. If that is the case, of course that will tell me something.

So, taking a deep breath, I go back up the stairs.

Not wishing to be spotted, I am keeping half an eye on the lobby behind me, so I almost collide with a large loogan who comes suddenly tramp-tramping down the stairs at me. He shoves on by mumbling, "Hide-ho," and continues down to the lobby and out to the street. I climb the rest of the stairs worrying about whether he saw my face.

The form on the bed is just as I left it. I approach cautiously and cast a doubtful glom over it.

They are bullet holes, all right, fired at close range, for there are powder burns on the sheet. And the bullets come from a biggish cannon. Of course, having learned that Wonderful purchased a large gun, and being well aware of how mopish he is, I have to give a thought to suicide. But I never hear of a guy shooting himself through the midsection on purpose, as it's bound to be painful, and I can't see Wonderful doing anything painful no matter how mopish he becomes. Though a small target, and hard to hit, I am more inclined to think he would blow his brains out.

At this moment there is a sharp "Pssst!" behind me, followed by a hushed voice saying, "We had better get out of here."

I practically leap in the air.

"Wonderful!" I gasp.

And it *is* Wonderful, safe and sound, standing there with his long dreary face hanging out.

But then who is it on the bed with all the holes in him? I snatch the sheet aside and discover only some pillows rolled up tight!

**“W**hat happens,” Wonderful informs me as we slip out the beer vendor door and leg it fast up the alley, “I am keeping to my room just like you said, but after several hours of drinking coffee I feel a great urge to visit the jakes. Since I am not born yesterday, I have already prepared the bedding as you saw it. I nip down the hall, leaving my door open, but as I am about to return, I hear someone on the stairs. Peering

out of the men's room, I am startled to see a large beefcake creep into my room. Immediately there is a sharp *paf! paf! paf!*, which has barely died away when you arrive on the scene.”

“You mean,” I interject, “you let me walk into that room and did nothing?”

“I held my breath. I hold it until you reappear and beat it downstairs. The big guy then emerges and goes right by you as you are coming back up.”

It is interesting. It is food for thought. But it is unnerving to know that this guy lets me walk into a room with a shooter who is lurking, perhaps, behind the door.

Hi-de-ho, the loogan says on the staircase.

Pleased to see me again.

We are footing it along the pavements at a high rate of speed, and Wonderful is making with the me-oh-my and the oh-dear-me and practically sobbing out loud, and I interrupt him to point out that none of this grieving is going to change things when there is somebody out there wishing to finalize you.

“But what can I do about it?” Wonderful asks fretfully.

“That depends.”

“On just what?”

“On just who that joe is who shoots holes in your sheets, who sent him there to do it, and why he is sent.”

“Isn't it obvious?”

“Not to me.”

“Crazy sends him.”

“Do you think so? I have a problem with that. Crazy is not a guy who will send a loogan around to

perform odd jobs with his meter running. Crazy is a guy who does things on the cheap, and who would therefore take care of such a matter himself."

"Then who is behind it?"

"We'll figure that out. But first you will have to tell me what you know—and before you begin, I have got to warn you: I am not happy to have learned that thus far you haven't been entirely straight with me."

Now it's Wonderful's turn to be miffed. I remind him that he does not mention the money he comes into just before Crazy lams from the town, and he shrugs his bone-rack shoulders and lets out a long gurgling whistle.

"It slipped my mind. But I'll tell you now."

It seems an individual by the name of Half-stub Hediger comes to see him about that time. Half-stub is in the ticket game, pushing tickets of every description—scratch-em tickets, raffle tickets, pool tickets—everything going. He takes a small percentage for his efforts, with a fat reward if he sells a winner.

This guy will never *buy* a ticket, however, claiming that as a professional he has an unfair advantage. He points to the half stub of a ticket pinned to his cap, which he says broke his heart when it won him a brand new van that the Sisters of Charity were hoping to win so that they could transport disabled folk to and from church. He is so cheezed at himself over this, he says, that he keeps the stub as a lasting reminder—though whether

he signs the van over to the sisters to relieve his conscience, he does not say.

"Half-stub hands me an envelope," says Wonderful, "stuffed with crisp, crinkly new mazuma. 'What's this for?' I ask him. 'Why, it's your winnings,' he says. 'Winnings for what?' I ask. 'Why, for that ticket you bought, oh, months and months ago.' And before I can pump him further, he trots off. I wrack my brain to recall what ticket he means but remember nothing. But one cannot argue against a packet of dough. Which is how I got money that day."

"How much money was it?"

"Lots of money."

"What did you do with it?"

"Oh, this and that."

"Did you purchase a gun with it in the last few days?" I ask.

He looks at me squarely with his big glassy eyes.

"Why do you ask?"

"It's just, you see, I heard that you did. One of a very large caliber, which can knock holes in large objects. But don't misunderstand me. It makes sense that you would buy such a howitzer if there are guys coming around your bedroom gunning for you."

"I did not know until today that anybody was gunning for me."

It's clear that he doesn't want to go up this road.

"If you tell me you don't buy a gun, I will have to believe it," I say. "But now that you know someone is gunning for you, you must find out who the push is behind it. The street has gotten awfully short for you, with Crazy at one end and we-don't-

know-who at the other. It leaves you with just one option."

"And what is that?"

"You're going to have to work something out with one of them."

"Oh, wonderful," he says.

So we go in search of Half-stub Hediger. He is a close-mouthed individual, about as communicative as a door post, who for that reason may not shed much light on the matter; but as I tell Wonderful, we have got to start somewhere.

We find him at a table in the Beer and Burger stuffing a chili special into his face. The minute he spots us he reacts, attempting to lam it out by way of the kitchen. He is quick for a guy with a gimp and a hobble, but he doesn't make it to the rear exit before Wonderful has got a fist in his shirt. He has the nerve to pretend he has only just noticed us.

"How is it going?" he asks.

"Just wonderful," says Wonderful.

"What can I do for you?"

"We'll find out."

Half-stub grins weakly. "I have a feeling," he says, "that you do not wish to buy tickets, that there is something else on your mind. It's usually me who chases the customer and not vice-versa or the other way round."

"I am going to tell you," says Wonderful, "what the matter is. Someone is attempting to put a jacket on me. It has something to do with that mazuma you gave me, so I want to know about that. I want to know just what ticket it was that I supposedly bought from you."

"Did I say that you bought the ticket from me?"

"I believe you did."

"Well, it was not bought from me, now I think of it."

"From who then?"

"You are looking a gift horse in the mouth?"

"I'd look an alligator in the mouth if it bites me."

He is a scrawny little fellow, this Half-stub, with long red-hairy arms like an orangutan. Peering closely at his famous ticket stub, I see nothing on it that refers to a van or to any nuns of any kind or description.

"I've wracked my brain," Wonderful is saying, "but in no way can I recall any such a ticket, and this is something I have got to know about, as the answer may have serious consequences."

"Even the question may have serious consequences," Half-stub cautions him.

"Then you do know something."

"I do not."

"You have something to share with me."

"I most certainly don't."

Well, it is clear that we are getting nowhere with this. This guy is not going to tell us anything. I am about to throw in the towel on this one, but Wonderful is not ready to leave. "Perhaps," says Wonderful, "you will change your mind if I give you a whiff of this excellent chili." And so saying he spins Half-stub around with his strangler's hands and bends him over a bubbling pot.

Half-stub starts to twitch and throw his head this way and that and roll his eyes like a terrified horse.



"Are you sure you can't tell me anything?" Wonderful asks.

"Maybe," gasps Half-stub, snorting superheated chili fumes, "maybe—I can—at that."

"Fine."

And Wonderful turns Half-stub around again.

Half-stub coughs for a while—a little skinny man's cough—*kek-kek-kek*—like that, while he drums his fist on his chest and says finally, "Well, my friend, here are the facts. *Kek*. I don't know myself what particular ticket it was, or just exactly where you may have bought it, but here is the true story, on my mother's grave. What happens is, I am working the street one day, and as luck will have it who should I run into but Don Dann—"

"Don Dann?" I put in, surprised.

This is a well-known guy. A regular gopher and go-get-'em for La-La Lloyd. He is forever hanging about the Ooh La La and the Lala-paloosa Club.

"Yes, Don Dann. And Don Dann says to me, 'Half-stub, I am glad I found you, as you can save me some time.' Well, of course, I don't see why I should save Don Dann time or anything else, but as he is very thick with you-know-who, I say nothing about that. He says to me, 'Half-stub, I am looking for Wonderful, and the reason I'm looking for him is to deliver to him a cash prize which he wins with a pool ticket fair and square and all above-board.' What pool is that?" I ask, since I know everything about such matters. 'Oh, it was this-or-that, or something-or-other,' he says, 'the main thing is that he won, and if

you will deliver his winnings to him, I'll be much obliged.' And he hands me the envelope that I gave to you."

"And that's all you can tell me?"

"That's the entire scoop."

"Should I believe this character?" Wonderful asks me.

"I think so."

"Hum," says Wonderful, letting Half-stub go.

"One last thing," Half-stub calls after us. "Don Dann warns me not to mention anything about him, so whatever you are up to, please leave me out of it."

And he flicks Wonderful's finger-marks out of his cheap shirt.

"What does it mean?" Wonderful asks as we stride off.

"You're sure you bought no ticket?"

"I just said so."

"Then we will have to go and confront Don Dann."

"That's a bad idea."

"Well, since Don Dann would not likely do anything without his boss's okay, your other option is to put the matter before La-La."

Wonderful stops in his tracks.

"Good grief! Do you know what you're saying? You're saying that La-La himself sent that mazuma to me!"

"It looks like it."

"But why would he do that?"

"I don't know. You can ask him."

"But I don't want to ask him."

"Then we'll talk to Don Dann."

We stop by the Ooh La La, as Don Dann often lurks there, but Little Hodges says our man has left the premises and was last seen head-

ing in the direction of the Lalapaloosa Club. Now, the Lalapaloosa, as I have said, is also a La-La Lloyd establishment and is in fact La-La Lloyd's headquarters, his largest and most lavish club, and so we are drawn into La-La's vicinity whether Wonderful wishes to be there or not. As it turns out, Don Dann seems to be waiting for us—no doubt he receives a heads-up from Little Hodges—and is standing at the entrance to the club looking goosey and tense. He starts in on us before we can say a word.

"What do you want with me?"

He is a pale pudgy guy who wears a shirt and tie every day of his life. He has glasses that flash when he speaks and buttons that strain at his midriff. His eyes bore into Wonderful as if he is witnessing the walking dead.

"Nothing much," I say, perceiving that Wonderful is reluctant to speak to him, being of the view that everybody surrounding La-La must be mobbed up in some way. "It's just that Wonderful is asking around about some mazuma that he apparently won."

"I knew that's what you guys wanted! Who gave you my name? Was it Half-stub?" Don Dann is trembling, he is so put out. His fat little lips are a sky-blue pink.

"It isn't like that," I explain, wishing to keep Half-stub out of the mix. "It's just that, at about that time, somebody sees you hand Half-stub an envelope."

This is of course a true statement.

"Aah!" Don Dann moans, "argh!," and falls back against the front of the club.

At this moment a car pulls up, and who should step out of this car but none other than La-La Lloyd. Seeing him, Wonderful has a minor heart attack. Now, the thing about La-La is that he is never a hoity-toity guy or a standoffish character but is usually most chummy and palsy-walsy with everyone, and he stops in his tracks to pass a moment with us.

"Well," he says, "how is everyone doing? All jake, I hope?"

Since La-La hopes that we are jake, we assure him immediately that we are jake, and that the whole world is jake so far as we are aware.

"Unfortunately the club isn't open for customers yet," says La-La, "so I suppose it is something else that brings you here on this fine day?"

He stands there smiling. We are at a loss for words. We do not quite know how to answer him, but luckily we are saved by Hightops, who yanks open the door of the club and deftly ushers his boss inside.

As the door closes, Don Dann heaves a juddering breath. He is in even worse condition than Wonderful, with an obvious case of the yips. I am puzzled at this. He is always calm and at ease on previous occasions.

"Did you notice," demands Don Dann in a squeaky voice, "that La-La didn't look at me?" He seems wound up like a clockwork mouse by this point. "Did you notice he stares right through me as if I am not even standing here?"

"I thought he looked cheery."

"He nearly always looks cheery. But when he stares through you like that, he is usually thinking of

some sort of cheer which you will not appreciate much."

"Well, you know best." I do not want to argue the point. I want to get Don Dann back on the subject, and I ask, "So what can you tell us about that cash Wonderful wins?"

"Aah!" he moans loudly. "Argh!," then wheels and disappears into the club, the big door thumping hard on his heels.

"That didn't get us far," Wonderful complains:

"Well," I reply, "we found out a few things: that Don Dann is surprised to see you, that he doesn't wish to talk about winnings of any kind, and that he does not feel himself to be in solid with his boss at the present time. I think we have stirred something up. I think we should hang around and see just what develops out of this."

And something does develop. Pretty quickly, too.

Don Dann emerges moments later. He looks carefully both ways up and down the street and then starts moving north. We set forth from the video store where we have been loitering and tail him: he travels fast for a guy with legs like two knackwurst sausages.

After covering a few blocks, he stops before a dusty old shop which appears to be vacant and presses a button. After a few rings who should open the door to him but the loogan whom I meet on the stairs at Wonderful's place, the guy who aerates Wonderful's bedding. He lets Don Dann inside, and they slam the door.

"Well," I say, "this is interesting.

I believe we are onto something here."

"What we are onto or not onto," replies Wonderful nervously, "may get us into a pickle, or even into the soup."

This is pretty much what you expect to hear from such a sour guy, so I pay no attention to him. There is a narrow passage between the shop and the building next to it, and thinking that there must be some other access at the rear of the place, I lead Wonderful down the narrow walkway which divides the building from its neighbor and find that indeed there is a rear door. Even better, down low and to the side of the stoop there is a window with the grime of ages on it. I quickly thumb some of the dirt away.

"Look at this," I whisper.

"I'd rather not," says Wonderful, edging into the alley.

"I think you should see it."

"I don't agree with you."

What can be seen through the window is not a lot, since the inside is mostly papered with newsprint. But there is a gap that one can peer through, and what I view through that gap is most revealing. People on telephones, in two long rows, all chattering away, while at the end of the room stands Don Dann looking peeved, throwing his arms around and gesturing violently at the gun-toting loogan.

"So what is it?" Wonderful puts in, ready for a quick sprint up the alley. "What's going on in there?"

"They're talking," I tell him, "probably about you. I don't think Don Dann expects to see you walking along the pavements so full of

health. I think he was under the impression that the health had all leaked out of you and is now putting it to the loogan that he has been careless about his work." I do some more squinting, up and down the room. "I believe this is one of those places which is referred to as a call center. And not just any call center but a bootleg call center, requiring the connivance of some joe at the phone company."

"You seem to know a lot."

"It's only guesswork. But while I'm at it, I'll make another guess. This is some small sideline of La-La's, which means it was La-La who put the run to Crazy, probably for bringing the heat down on him. La-La shoved Crazy out of the picture. Then, because he needed a setup guy so that no signpost was pointing at him, he got Don Dann to pass money to you through Half-stub, thinking you are such a loser as will take the mazuma and never question it."

"Yes, well, I *am* glad to take mazuma and not question it."

"Which proves he was right. Things were fine for awhile, but then Crazy returns and begins to threaten you, and you start going around asking questions."

"You're the one with the questions!"

"Yes, but on your behalf, remember?"

Wonderful slumps against a trash container with his arm draped around it. The full implication of all this seems to have suddenly become too much for him.

"You said before that La-La sent me the money. Now you are also

saying that he sends that loogan into my room to aerate me?" He is very downhearted, for it is well-known that if La-La wants to aerate you, then you will be aerated eventually and that will be that. "You must be wrong."

"You have a better explanation?"

Wonderful shakes his head, and a shudder goes through him.

"This is wonderful! Just wonderful! I should never have gone to you in the first place. You only get me into bigger trouble. Now I will have to wear bullet-proof pajamas. I was better off having only Crazy to worry about, for, after all, what is a cut or two? You are cut—*zit!*—and you heal up again. But La-La—*boom!*—he puts the big kibosh on you."

"Well," I reassure him, "at least you now know where you stand."

"Yes. In front of my grave." A large tear appears in the corner of his eye. "Why me? What have I got to do with anything? If Crazy is in their hair again, why shoot *my* bedsheets full of holes? Does not Crazy have bedsheets, too?"

It's a valid point.

And Wonderful goes further.

"Furthermore," he continues, "I see another problem with your argument. If it's La-La who is wanting to finish me, why doesn't he put the arm on me today when I am standing right there on the street in front of him?"

This is something to reflect on with soberness. Now I myself am beginning to have some doubts. Wonderful is right. La-La does not put the arm on him. Furthermore, La-La does not seem surprised to see him there. Only one person is

surprised to see us there, and that person is Don Dann. I am not sure what this means.

Nor do I have time to think about it, for at this moment we have a visitor, striding towards us out of the alley. It is no one else but Crazy Nate, and it is clear that he has brought with him a large number of his favorite items, for his coat is drooping so low he has to hitch it up with both hands.

"Well, well," he says, "so there you are," leering at Wonderful, or maybe glaring at him. "I might have known I would find you here. How are you?"

"Wonderful," replies Wonderful, though he doesn't sound so good.

"I've been looking for you." Crazy gives his coat a hike, which produces a clanking sound. "I should have begun here in the first place, at the spot where your pals hang out."

"My pals?" Wonderful looks baffled.

"Yes," says Crazy, with a nod at the window I have just been peering through. "I know about these guys. I know the story."

"What is the story?" I put in. "We don't know it."

"Your friend does. He rats me out. He dials up the authorities, and he rats me out." Crazy ominously has one hand in his pocket.

"I did not rat you out!" Wonderful says vehemently, his eyes wide and panic-stricken. "If you are ratted out, someone else must have done it." He points at the window also. "*They* must have done it!"

"But you got the money. Just you, and only you!"

And with these words Crazy

draws from his pocket the largest, fattest, wickedest-looking knife I have ever seen, something effectual for the shish or kabob of a sheep with blood channels and serrations and a twisty point on it that will penetrate a bar table. All in all, a most impressive potato peeler.

Wonderful sharply sucks in his breath and jumps behind me.

I say to Crazy, "What do you plan to do with that?" Not the brightest question but all that comes to mind.

"I am going to fix this guy," Crazy says.

"But you don't know for certain that he ratted on you."

"I know enough. And there is also another matter. The sending of a loogan around to my rooming house this morning with a howitzer, a guy who is a most careless shooter, busting up a number of my landlady's possessions such as her lava lamp, her black velvet Elvis painting, and her cat."

"He doesn't shoot at you?" I ask, puzzled.

"He *tries* to shoot at me. Only his aim is not so good, and he shoots the support out of the recliner I'm sitting in so that it falls down flat on the floor with me on top of it. I am lucky to escape with my life. The cat, unfortunately, is not so lucky."

By this time I have managed to extract Wonderful from behind my person and drag him around to the front of me. Having done so, I am startled and shocked to see a large gun in Wonderful's hand.

Crazy, on the other hand, does not flinch. It is as if he has guns pointed at him every day of his life, which may be close to the truth.

He calmly reaches out and takes Wonderful's gun away from him as if it is no more than a water pistol.

As I have said, Wonderful is no gunman.

Crazy then steps forward menacingly. He has got the knife in one hand and the gun in the other. At this distance it is easy to see how he gets his name, for he has a light in his eyes that does not shine quite straight, as if it is reflected off broken lenses at different angles. Of course I want to tell him everything—how Wonderful gets the money from he-knows-not-whom, how he thinks it is Crazy who tried to kill *him*, and how he in fact has had a loogan shoot his bedsheets full of holes.

But at this moment there is a loud crash from the front of the building, a lot of yelling, and a drum-beat of footsteps. The next instant the rear door slams open, and the big gun-toting loogan bursts into the daylight and comes tramp-tramping down the steps. He too has a wild look in his eye, which is suddenly fixed upon poor Wonderful. Only then do I notice the howitzer in his fist. He aims the weapon as if Wonderful is the architect of his woes, and there is the sound of a serious gun going off. I hear a great many guns in my time, some that go *pop!*, some that go *pow!*, but this is a *boom-boom-boom!* At the same moment the scene is obscured by the terrified phone marketers stampeding past. I assume the worst for Wonderful.

When the view clears, there is indeed a person on the ground, but surprisingly that person is the big

loogan. Wonderful is still on his feet. So is Crazy. Wonderful is gazing at the loogan as if the guy falls on the ground of his own accord. I see Wonderful's gun in Crazy's grip, and I understand.

Following this brannigan there is an odd silence. It is broken by the arrival of La-La Lloyd, who suddenly appears at the open doorway.

"Well, well," he says, taking in the scene. "How are we doing?"

"Just wonderful," whispers Wonderful.

**B**ack at Wonderful's room in the Westbrook I am sitting at his teeny table trying to talk to him while he is carrying on a separate conversation with Mao Chao, the desk clerk, explaining to this official why the sheets on his bed have large holes in them.

"It's the moths," Wonderful mumbles helplessly.

"Moths? No! Not moths!" Mao speaks fiercely as if he knows exactly what the moths have been up to. "Smoking inna bed! You know what Mr. Rumano say. A guy smoke inna bed—kick him out! Else he burn down the whole place, kill everybody!"

"Hold on a second," I put in, "Wonderful didn't make those holes."

"He smoke inna bed."

"No. Look." I take the bedsheet from Mao's hand, splay it out, and invite him to look at it. "See this? It's a powderburn. Someone tried to shoot the poor guy." I step over to the bed, shove my finger into one of the holes in the pillows, and find nothing. I do likewise with a hole in



the mattress and—to my own surprise—I come up with a slug which I then hand to Mao.

“See?”

Mao scrutinizes the slug, tumbling it in his hand as if it might be a fake, and then says grudgingly, “Okay. He get shot at. I guess that’s all right.” He strides to the door with the perforated sheet draped over his arm and turns to wag his finger at Wonderful one more time. “But no smoking inna bed.”

As Mao clumps huffily off down the hall, I sit back down in my chair. “For a minute there you were almost history.”

“I am almost history when the loogan drops in shooting.”

“I thought you were going to do some shooting yourself today. And you told me that you didn’t purchase a gun. That was a lie.”

“No, what I said was, I did not know that anyone was gunning for me. Which was true. I was sure I’d be stabbed.” Wonderful takes up a cigarette, one of the little thin gray stinkers that Mao Chao likes to smoke; he is very good at cadging cigarettes. He shakes his head with great woe. “My fingerprints are on that gun. Now I suppose I’m going to be arrested.”

I give some thought to this.

“Crazy gave the gun to La-La, yes?”

“Yes.”

“And Hightops took the loogan away in the car, right?”

“Right.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about. La-La will take care of things. He has experience in such matters.” I give my head a long, slow

shake. “Those guys make a grave error running that wheeze behind La-La’s back. No wonder Hightops knows so much about Crazy’s game—he had been looking into it on La-La’s behalf. And no wonder Don Dann acts so nervous and so guilty when we talk to him earlier. He was thinking we’d bring La-La down on him, all those questions we were asking.”

“And we did—or *you* did. It was the questions *you* were asking.”

To me this is very unappreciative.

“The questions were on your behalf as I keep telling you. And they were justified. When Crazy returns saying he is going to get you, you are naturally entitled to some answers. But they don’t give us any. Instead they panic. Don Dann puts the loogan on you and also sends him around to visit Crazy.” I glance at Wonderful reprovingly. “I helped you out. You ought to be happy.”

Wonderful looks anything but happy. He lights his cigarette, puffs his match out, and sends a plume of smoke toward the ceiling. “There is still Don Dann. I don’t believe he’ll be happy with me.”

It seems that nothing can cheer up this guy.

“You don’t have to worry about Don Dann. He will be chastised most severely.”

And evidently that is the case, for nothing is ever heard from Don Dann again.

There is one footnote. Days after the rhubarb I am walking with Wonderful on Logan Avenue when who comes striding along the pavements in his clinking coat but Crazy

Nate Prima. And though previously we would not encourage him, we now feel a strange kinship with him and are compelled to stop and remark that it is a fine day all things considered.

"Very fine," he agrees, nodding.

"I suppose things are back to normal now," I say.

"Normal?" he says, his eyebrows arching as if he has never heard of the word.

"I mean between you and Wonderful. After all, you saved his life."

Crazy looks at us. "Oh, that. Yes, I guess I did." His expression changes. He sidles closer to Wonderful.

"I don't suppose that at present you require anything in the kitchenware line of things?"

He produces a knife like a small machete, wagging it suggestively in the bright sunlight.

"Well," says Wonderful, eyeing this slicer none too happily, "I don't have a kitchen . . ."

"In that case," says Crazy Nate, "you have no cutlery at all, which means you can use at least a dozen similar items. I have many to choose from, and I could manage a discount. Let us talk . . ."

And these two friends wander off, arm in arm . . .

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FICTION

# YEN

Martin Limón



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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/00

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**N**othing about the redhead was GI issue.

She wore sheer black panties and matching brassiere and lay sprawled on the twisted sheets of an unmade bunk. Her tongue lolled pink and puffed across rouged lips. Ernie Bascom, my partner at the Criminal Investigation Division, checked her pulse—staring all the while at the voluptuous curves of her freckled body.

My name is George Sueño. I'm an agent for the 8th U.S. Army C.I.D. in Seoul, Republic of Korea. In other words, an overseas GI cop.

We were in the barracks of 21 T-Car, the 21st Transportation Company (Car), the motor pool for 8th Army headquarters. The year was 1974.

Green plywood boards partitioned the big gray Quonset hut into tiny compartments. This room belonged to Private First Class Francisco Bernal, the driver assigned to the Officers' Wives Club. Our job was to find him and question him concerning the theft of one thousand dollars from the home of the commanding general of the 8th U.S. Army.

Instead of finding Private Bernal, we found this young American woman, passed out in a room that reeked of spilled bourbon and dried sweat.

Ernie dropped her wrist.

"Heart's still pumping. Looks like Private Bernal had himself a truly fine Saturday night."

"With stolen money," I said.

Ernie nodded.

The redhead shook her curly locks. They rustled past pink ears, and then her eyes opened. Blazing

green. She sat up suddenly, her breasts swinging wildly with the movement.

"What are you doing here?"

Ernie crowbarred a grin. "Good morning. Let me guess. You must be Miss Motor Pool of 1974."

The redhead's eyes darted around the room. "Where's Paco?"

Ernie gazed at me blankly.

"Paco's the diminutive of Francisco," I said.

Ernie nodded; his smile broadened once again, and he turned back to the redhead.

"That's what we were going to ask you. Seems there's been a little theft at the CG's residence."

She snorted. A dainty yet dismissive sound. Then she bent over and started groping for something, shoving her clothes out of the way. "Where are my cigarettes?"

Her tone was impatient, as if she were dealing with incompetent servants who weren't responding fast enough.

Ernie grabbed a small black purse off a scratched footlocker and rummaged inside. He found a pack of mentholated filter tips and tossed them to her along with a lighter.

While she fumbled with her nicotine, Ernie searched through the contents of the purse and pulled out a military dependent I.D. card. He studied it for a moment, his eyes growing wider, and then he whistled softly.

The redhead ignored him. Used, apparently, to people being impressed by her pedigree.

Ernie tossed the card to me.

I snatched it out of the air. Still watching the redhead, I tilted the

laminated surface toward the dim light of the floor lamp. Then I saw why Ernie had whistled.

Her name was Tidwell, Veronica H.

I almost whistled myself but fought the urge.

Paco, Private First Class Francisco Bernal, was digging himself deeper and deeper into a world of trouble.

First, Veronica was a minor. Age seventeen. Statutory rape is something the army brass can overlook if the girl is a foreign national but not if she's the dependent daughter of one of their own. Second, she was a Tidwell. Daughter of the most powerful American in Asia. General Xavier Q. Tidwell, commander of the 8th United States Army and the recent victim of a theft of one thousand dollars.

Suddenly I knew how the money had been stolen.

Last night Ernie and I had inspected the commanding general's home office where the safe was located. No sign of a break-in. Hadn't expected any, since security guards patrol the residence twenty-four hours a day. But somehow someone had gained access to General Tidwell's inner sanctum and opened his safe. Either he was the world's slickest safecracker or he had the combination.

I gazed at the seventeen-year-old Veronica. She was still bleary-eyed but sitting on the edge of the bunk now, sucking on her cancer stick, puffing smoke into the air in a way that she imagined appeared sophisticated. She wasn't concerned about being half-naked and having

two army cops leering at her. Foolish youth knows no shame.

But it must've been she who'd copied the combination from the slip of paper hidden in her father's wallet. And borrowed a key to his home office. I shot a question at her.

"Why did Paco take the money?"

She gazed at me through a puff of smoke, thinking things through. Organizing her caginess. "He didn't *take* the money," she said. "He *borrowed* it."

Ernie crossed his arms and leaned his tall frame against a rickety chest of drawers. He's a couple of inches shorter than me. About six one, with a face and attitude that, for some reason, women find attractive. He kept his grin firmly in place, greatly enjoying the show. Especially now that we'd figured out who stole the general's money.

"Only a loan?" I asked.

She dimpled her cheeks and gave me a cross-eyed look. Letting me know that she was pleased that the moron had finally understood.

"When does Paco plan to pay this thousand dollars back?" I asked.

Veronica let out a sigh, exasperated by my slowness.

"Before the end of the week," she said. "He only needs it for an investment."

"What type of investment?"

Suddenly Veronica realized that she'd said too much. She puffed nervously.

When she didn't answer, Ernie spoke up. "Maybe buying and selling a little weed? Or some hash? Something that the kids at the high school need?"

She dropped her gleaming ciga-

rette to her knee. "Paco's not a pusher."

"But he is a dealer," I said.

She didn't answer but looked away and continued to smoke.

A photo sat on the chest of drawers. Private Paco Bernal in green uniform and garrison cap. He was a full-cheeked Hispanic man. Dark. Handsome. A smile that could break teenage hearts.

I knew him. Of fifteen hundred enlisted men assigned to 8th Army headquarters, only two of us were Chicanos from East L.A., Paco and myself. I didn't know him well. Only one or two casual conversations, asking one another if we had mutual acquaintances back in the barrio. We didn't. My cop instincts had picked up on a devious side to Paco Bernal, but I never thought he'd go as far as this.

Now he'd become a thief. And he was shaming the Latin world.

"By the way," I asked, "where is the dear boy?"

Unconsciously Veronica patted the sheet beneath her and gazed down as if looking for him.

"I don't know," she said.

"But he was here last night when you fell asleep?"

She raised the cigarette back to her lips and nodded slowly, lost in thought.

"Are you his only girlfriend?" I asked.

Instead of growing angry she continued to stare at the wall. "I don't know," she answered. "Why would I care about that?"

"Sure," Ernie said, the grin fading from his face. "Why would you care about that?"

Ernie convinced Veronica Tidwell to put on her clothes, and after finishing her cigarette she combed her hair and started pulling herself together.

I slipped away and found a phone in the 21 T-Car orderly room. The hard part about this whole mess was making the call to C.I.D. headquarters and telling them that the commanding general's daughter had been caught in an enlisted man's barracks.

I dialed and got through and told my story. There was a long pause, and then the receiver was dropped and shoe leather pounded on wooden planks.

Even through the static-filled wire I could hear stuff hitting the fan.

The search for Private Paco Bernal lasted all through Sunday afternoon and into the night. Ernie and I interviewed the other guys in the barracks. A few of them had seen Paco come in last night with Veronica. She was drunk and stumbling, but Paco appeared sober. None of them had seen him leave.

None of his uniforms were missing from his wall locker, so he must've been wearing civvies when he left. And his little traveling bag was still there, so he probably left wearing only the clothes on his back with a thousand stolen dollars tucked safely in his pocket. One item was missing from his field gear: his bayonet.

MP patrols searched the base, and Ernie and I personally took charge of reconnoitering Itaewon, the redlight district about a half mile



from the military compound. We found a few Korean business girls and blackmarket mama-sans who knew Paco, but none of them had seen him since last night. He and Veronica had been hard to miss, parading through the nightclub district, Veronica in a dress so skimpy that even the Korean whores would've been afraid to be seen in it.

When no trace was found of Paco, we expanded our search to include Seoul's International Airport at Kimpo. No Francisco Bernal on any of the manifests. We also checked the military embarkation point at Osan Air Force Base. Again, no sign of our boy Paco.

While conducting these checks, we passed along an edict from the 8th Army commander. If found, Private First Class Francisco Bernal was to be arrested and detained. There are only a half dozen international embarkation points from South Korea. We contacted them all.

Paco Bernal was locked up tighter than a bug in a bottle.

I was asleep in my bunk when the MP desk sergeant shook me awake. I shielded my eyes from the glare of his flashlight.

"You Sueño?"

"Yeah. What happened?"

"The CG's daughter escaped."

I shoved the army blanket away and sat up. "What do you mean 'escaped'?"

"She climbed out the window of her bedroom at the CG's quarters. A gate guard spotted her leaving the compound, but he was too stupid to stop her. He did see her wav-

ing down a kimchee cab. She headed toward Itaewon."

"And the commanding general wants me to get out of bed and look for her, is that it?"

"That's it. You and your partner, What's-his-name."

"Have you waked up What's-his-name?"

"Yeah. He took a swing at me when I did. Good thing he missed. Otherwise I'd have written him up on charges."

At least I could be sure that he'd waked up the right guy.

I climbed out of bed, opened my wall locker, and started putting on my clothes. The beam from the MP desk sergeant's flashlight disappeared down the hallway.

It was oh-dark-thirty when Ernie and I arrived in the redlight district of Itaewon. The place was shuttered and locked now because of the midnight-to-four curfew. Two and three story nightclubs loomed over narrow cobbled alleyways, casting shadows that disappeared into endless rows of tile-roofed hovels. Unlit neon drooped from the dirty brick walls like cheap jewelry dangling from a prostitute's ear.

A couple of times "white mice"—the white-clad curfew enforcement police—stopped us and inspected our C.I.D. badges. Each time I spoke in Korean and asked if they'd seen a young American woman in the area. They shook their heads.

Apparently Veronica Tidwell had arrived in Itaewon before the midnight-to-four curfew took effect.

"We're not going to find her out here now," Ernie said.

"Maybe not," I answered. "If you were her, where would you go?"

"To see Paco."

"Right. And where would Paco be right now?"

"Hiding."

"Other than that. He had some business to conduct, remember? With that thousand dollars."

"Sure," Ernie said. "He was going to buy some drugs in bulk, move them quickly, make a profit, and return the thousand dollars to the CG's safe."

"So if he were going to do that, in Itaewon, who would he see?"

Ernie thought about it a moment. "Haggler Lee."

An alley narrower than most led up a steep hill. We followed it and took a right and then a left and another left. No lights shone behind the ten foot high stone and brick walls that lined the narrow lane. Finally we stopped and pounded on an ancient wood-plank door.

We kept pounding for ten minutes, taking turns when our knuckles grew raw. Finally the big door squeaked open.

Haggler Lee sat crosslegged on a floor covered with thickly layered oil paper. Ernie and I sat across from him. Between us squatted a foot high round table with mother-of-pearl dragons inlaid in black lacquer. Atop the table, guttering like a dying ghost, flame flickered from a fat wax candle.

Haggler Lee smiled.

Two teeth poked out of red gums. Both of them brown.

"Paco Bernal," he said. "A good boy."

"Does he work for you much?" Ernie asked.

"He run errand sometimes."

"What kind of errands?"

"On compound." Haggler Lee shrugged his narrow shoulders. The hand-stitched white cranes of his silk tunic made a rustling sound as if flapping their wings. "Deliveries."

"Of dope?"

Haggler Lee's wrinkled face grimaced in pain. "Not dope. Only natural product."

"Like marijuana?"

"What grows from the earth no can hurt body."

Also, it can't get you in trouble with the Korean National Police. Trafficking in hard drugs like cocaine or heroin is punishable by death in Korea. A law that is strictly enforced. But the Korean authorities are much more tolerant about mildly hallucinogenic plants that grow from the soil. Korea is an ancient agricultural country. Farmers need to supplement their income between harvests. If GI's wanted to smoke some weed, what harm could it do?

I leaned forward, trying to catch more candlelight on Haggler Lee's face. "Did Paco make a big buy recently?" I asked. "Like a thousand bucks?"

Haggler Lee looked pained again, as if his small stomach were churning razor blades.

"Paco has some problems," Haggler Lee replied.

That was the understatement of the week.

"Like what kind of problems?"

"Like bad people hear about thou-

sand dollars stolen on compound. Like these bad people also hear that good boy Paco, he the one stole thousand dollars."

"And Paco was hiding?" I said.

"Yes. Not very smart. Hiding with business girls in Itaewon. Everybody know business girls have big mouth."

Haggler Lee pointed to his lips. The word "mouth" sounded like "mouse."

"And these bad boys heard where he was hiding," Ernie said. Haggler Lee nodded, his face sad now.

"So Paco's money is gone," I said, "stolen by hoodlums. And he never bought the marijuana from you."

Haggler Lee splayed his bony hands. "So sad story."

"Yes," I answered. "So sad story."

"Where is Paco?" Ernie asked.

"He run away. With that girl. She come to get him tonight. She have some more money so Paco can hide."

"Where'd they go?"

Haggler Lee breathed deeply and then let the air out slowly between clenched teeth, a Korean sign of painful indecision. When he didn't answer, Ernie rapped his knuckles on the inlaid mother-of-pearl table.

"What do you want, Lee?" he asked.

Haggler Lee's eyes shone. "Who on blackmarket detail now?"

"Burrows and Slabem," Ernie answered.

Jake Burrows and Felix Slabem were our fellow agents at 8th Army C.I.D. Not friends of ours.

"Can you make sure," Haggler Lee asked, "that they no visit me tomorrow?"

Although they had no jurisdiction over Haggler Lee's blackmarket operations, agents Burrows and Slabem routinely showed up to scare GI's away and disrupt Lee's business. Ernie and I didn't. He was too valuable a source of information.

"We'll make something up," Ernie said. "Our case is top priority. We'll tell the first sergeant we need their help to research something."

Lee nodded in agreement. "Good. Then I tell you where Paco and general's daughter go." He clawed his long fingernails on the edge of the small table. "But you no like."

"We like. No like. No make difference," Ernie said.

"Paco go someplace hide. Nobody know where. But before he go, general's daughter say goodbye to Paco. Say she go back to American compound. But she no go compound. She go Golden Dragon Travel Agency."

"To buy tickets to leave the country?" I asked.

"No," Lee said. "To earn one thousand dollars. To give back to her father. To get Paco out of trouble."

Ernie's eyes widened. "How in the hell is she going to make a thousand bucks at a travel agency?"

Lee waited for us to figure it out. I already had. A few seconds later so did Ernie.

"Japanese tourists," he said.

Lee nodded. The pain in his stomach must've hurt something fierce. His wrinkled face twisted in anguish.

My gut wasn't feeling too good either.

The big question Ernie and I faced was whether or not to report what we'd learned from Haggler Lee up the chain of command. Plenty of waste had already hit the fan. But now that waste was liable to splatter back on us.

After reporting that we were unable to find Veronica Tidwell in Itaewon, I did my best to catch a couple of hours sleep before reveille. But shortly afterward, Ernie and I were both up and in the 8th Army snack bar, slurping on bitter coffee and munching bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches.

"Before reporting this," I said, "we should talk to Veronica's mom."

"Her mom?" Ernie said. "What about the commanding general?"

"First, we start with his wife," I said. "The *real* power in 8th Army."

Ernie didn't like it, but he agreed to the plan. As long as I promised to do all the talking.

"Apparently," I told Mrs. Tidwell, "Veronica believes that if she can somehow raise the thousand dollars and return it to your husband's safe, he will drop the charges against Private Bernal."

We were in the quarters of the commanding general of the 8th United States Army. The well-tended grounds were atop a small hill in the middle of 8th Army's south post, surrounded by a razor wire-topped security fence. Guards patrolled the perimeter. The house itself was what I suppose a realtor would call sprawling ranchstyle, with about a dozen rooms. Quite a

luxury in the middle of an overcrowded Asian society.

Ernie and I sat on a leather sofa, two cups of hot black coffee in front of us on a glass-topped table. Mrs. Tidwell sat on a straight-backed chair opposite us, her manicured fingers folded on her lap. Even this early in the morning her hair was combed, her face made up, and she wore a blue print dress that didn't look as if it had come out of the PX.

Mrs. Tidwell rose, turned away from us, and strode toward a plate-glass window that looked out over a row of neatly pruned cherry trees.

"She might be right," Mrs. Tidwell said. "My husband brought the charges against Private Bernal. He can also drop the charges."

Her husband also had the power to drop the charges even if somebody else had brought them. On 8th Army compound—unaffected by Korean jurisdiction—the commanding general has the power of a prosecutor, a judge, and sometimes even a jury.

What she was telling us was that if Veronica raised the money she would make sure her husband dropped the charges. Good. But what she needed to know now was how Veronica planned to raise the money.

Ernie glanced over at me. I swallowed and opened my mouth.

"I think you'll agree, Mrs. Tidwell," I said, "that Veronica's plan to raise the money is not a wise one."

Mrs. Tidwell turned away from the garden scene outside, returned, and sat down facing me.

"Just what is her plan?"

I spread my fingers. "We can't be

a hundred percent certain, of course, but our informant indicated that Veronica plans to engage in a business deal with the Golden Dragon Travel Agency."

Mrs. Tidwell stared at me blankly.

"To be frank, ma'am," I continued, "their practices are somewhat unsavory. Trips arranged for wealthy Japanese businessmen. Introductions made."

"Sex tours," she said.

"Not always," I answered. "Sometimes the women act as escorts only."

Mrs. Tidwell kept her green eyes on me, allowing the heat of her stare to linger on my face.

"Don't lie to me," she said.

I didn't answer.

"This Golden Dragon Travel Agency is going to set her up with some rich Japanese businessman here in Seoul." Mrs. Tidwell leaned forward, her long face intent, the narrow lines of her cheeks seeming to sink in on themselves. "What fun for him. A beautiful redheaded American girl. Only seventeen. And what good face for him. The daughter of the commanding general of the 8th United States Army."

She stared at me as if I were acting as Veronica Tidwell's pimp. Ernie studied the floor, not breathing.

"That's why we came to you first," I said. "Before reporting anything —" I paused "—officially."

She sat back, breathed deeply, and turned her head as if seeing the intricately designed wallpaper for the first time. Then she snapped her attention back to me.

"Can you find her?"

"With the help of the Korean National Police and possibly with the —"

"Not with them. Alone."

"It would be difficult."

"But not impossible?"

"Not," I answered, "if we used unorthodox methods."

"Such as?"

Ernie finally spoke up. "We'd have to get rough with some people. To make them talk fast."

She gazed at him as if he'd just dropped in from Mars.

"And if you're arrested for these 'unorthodox methods,' you'll be in a lot of trouble."

"Yes," Ernie said, holding her stare.

"Unless I promised to pull you out of that trouble."

"That's what we were hoping for," I said. She rose again and walked over to the mantelpiece. Atop it sat many family pictures but none of any other children but Veronica. When she was a baby. A high school graduation photo. Her laughing with other girls and holding pompoms.

"We've spoiled her," Mrs. Tidwell said. "You know that."

Neither Ernie nor I answered. Instead, we stared into our cold coffee.

"If we make this official," Mrs. Tidwell said, "my husband would lose much face. The Korean government would know of our shame, and eventually the U.S. ambassador. My husband might even have to resign as commander of 8th Army." She shook her head. "That would kill him. And the thought that every Korean policeman in the coun-

try would know that my daughter planned to sell herself to a rich Japanese. It's not tolerable."

She walked quickly across the thick carpet. "You must find her. You must find her right away, before she does this horrible thing. And don't worry about the consequences. I'll be here to protect you with every ounce of strength I possess."

Ernie and I rose from the sofa. She stared into my eyes and shook my hand.

"And one more thing," she said. "When you find Paco, don't hurt him. Veronica would never forgive me."

"We'll try not to hurt anybody, ma'am," I said.

We walked down the long driveway to our Jeep. Mrs. Tidwell stood at the huge entranceway to the CG's quarters and watched until we drove away.

**S**torming the Golden Dragon Travel Agency was as easy as biting off a chunk of rice cake. We pushed past the secretary and kicked in the honcho's door. A plaque in front of his desk said his name was Kim. When Ernie pulled his .45 and shoved the barrel up into the tip of Mr. Kim's nostril, the wealthy travel agent couldn't talk fast enough.

Unfolded on his desk was a huge album featuring wallet-sized snapshots of dozens of Korean women. His sales portfolio. Before the Japanese businessmen arrived in the country, they had already picked out their girl.

I didn't see Veronica's photo, but

when I mentioned her name, he knew who she was quick enough.

"She go with Mr. Fukushima."

"Fuku-whatta?" Ernie asked.

"Ondo Fukushima. Very powerful man."

"How powerful?" I asked.

The honcho of the Golden Dragon Travel Agency stared into the barrel of Ernie's .45 and swallowed. "Yakuza," he said.

The Japanese mafia.

"What hotel is he staying at?"

"Not there yet. He arrive airport one hour ago. Has many business meetings. Then he will go to dinner and some nightclubs. I don't know where."

Ernie punched him. The travel agent howled in pain. I checked to make sure that his secretary hadn't reached for the telephone. She hadn't. She sat at her desk, hands flat on the lacquered wood in front of her, shaking like a frightened rabbit.

I felt bad about this treatment, but we had no choice but to scare the hell out of them. If I'd asked this Mr. Kim questions without using intimidation, he would've either told me to take a hike or stalled and demanded a price. Neither of which I had time for.

"I don't *know* where he go," Kim said. "Yakuza don't write down . . . How you say?"

"Itinerary," I said.

He nodded. "Yes. Itinerary."

"Is Veronica with him now?"

"Yes. His driver pick her up this morning, take her to airport. She will greet him there and stay with him during all meetings today."

That was unusual. Usually the



Japanese businessmen hide their girls in the hotel rooms. Sometimes they take them to the casinos or the nightclubs, but that's about it.

Kim responded to my questioning look. "Fukushima get good *face*," he said. "He want everybody see American girl. Daughter of GI honcho. He show her to everybody."

"How much is he paying her?" I asked.

"One thousand dollars. For whole weekend."

"What does she have to do?"

Kim's eyes widened. "What you mean?"

"What service does she have to perform for the thousand dollars?"

A look of confusion clouded Kim's face.

"Does she have to sleep with him?" I asked.

Then he understood. "Of course," he answered. "She woman. He man."

Ernie slapped him. Not hard. Just with his left hand.

"What hotel?" I asked again.

"White Crane Hotel," he answered. "New one. Best in Seoul."

Kim didn't know what time they'd be arriving at the hotel. Like he said, a yakuza doesn't advertise his itinerary. But late, he figured. Late tonight.

Before we left, Ernie pointed his .45 once more between Kim's eyes.

"No phone calls," Ernie said, "to this yakuza or to any of his buddies. Or to the police. You got that?"

Kim nodded frantically.

"If you forget," Ernie said, "I'll be back."

Kim sat frozen as we left. The secretary was still shaking.

The lobby of the White Crane Hotel was almost as big as an airplane hangar. The floor was carpeted in a red design that spread from the long check-in counter toward a mock waterfall and a circular stairway leading up to chic restaurants and boutiques with French names. A European pianist wearing a tuxedo with tails tinkled out soft tunes on an enormous grand piano.

"This joint stinks," Ernie said.

He was referring to the scent of roses permeating the air.

GIs weren't welcome here. We felt as out of place as a pair of gorillas shuffling through à Paris fashion show.

All the customers were Asian. Mostly Korean but a few Chinese from Hong Kong and whole regiments of Japanese tourists. The poor ones tended to migrate in herds, arriving in air-conditioned buses. The rich ones traveled in sleek black sedans with white upholstery and white-gloved drivers.

"I thought Americans ruled the world," Ernie said.

"Americans only *think* they rule the world," I answered.

We sat on frail metal chairs in a tea shop with a clear view of the entranceway to the hotel. We'd cased the joint earlier, tipping a bellhop to find out if Mr. Ondo Fukushima had checked in yet. The bellhop said his suite was ready but he had not arrived.

Then we ate chow in a workingman's chop house across the street and returned to wait. It was almost midnight now. If Ondo Fukushima

and Veronica Tidwell didn't show up soon, they wouldn't at all.

Ernie elbowed me. "Check out the armor battalion."

A line of five black sedans pulled up outside the plate glass entrance-way of the hotel. The liveried door-men scurried up and down the row, swinging open doors. Burly Japanese men in expensive suits and highly polished shoes emerged first. Their hair was slicked back, and if communication devices had been plugged into their ears, I would've thought they were Secret Service. One of them barked an all clear, and from the central sedan a diminutive Japanese emerged wearing a pin-striped suit in a shade of green so dark it glowed.

"The head honcho," Ernie said.

As he strode through the door, his immaculately coiffed bodyguards arrayed themselves around him like a phalanx of ancient Greek warriors protecting their king.

Behind them high heels clicked on marble.

Veronica Tidwell wore the same skimpy blue dress that had been crumpled on the floor of Paco Bernal's room, but it was cleaned and pressed now. The freckled flesh of her décolletage peeked over silk material like the prow of a sailing ship.

Veronica scurried behind the formation of men, keeping her head down, apparently ignored but nevertheless making it clear that she was a woman following her master.

Ernie snorted in derision.

"Come on," I said. "It's showtime."

We'd already discussed how we'd approach Veronica. Our fondest

hope was that the proud yakuza chieftain would treat her like a worthless woman and make her follow far behind. He hadn't let us down. If we could, we'd move her away quietly, out the door, and into the army-issue Jeep waiting around the corner.

At least that's how I hoped things would turn out.

Instead, as soon as I moved forward and put my hand on Veronica's elbow, two of Ondo Fukushima's thugs stopped in their tracks and turned on us. Ernie slipped his hand beneath his coat, not pulling his .45 but making it clear to the men he was armed. I tugged on Veronica's elbow.

"Let me go," she said.

"Don't make trouble," I told her. "We're taking you home."

"Like hell." With her free hand she reached inside the purse strapped to her shoulder. She pulled out a wad of blue bills. Ten thousand yen notes. "*This* is what he paid me," she said. "More than a thousand bucks." In a falsetto voice she said, "You change money, GI?" Then she reverted to her regular voice. "But I have to stay with him," she said, "for the whole weekend."

"Is it worth it?"

"If it saves Paco. Yes."

"Why don't you just ask your father to drop the charges?"

The smooth flesh of her face crinkled. "I wouldn't ask him for ice water in hell! When he gets his money back, he'll *have* to drop the charges."

That wasn't strictly true, but this was no time to argue the intricacies of the Uniform Code of Military Jus-

tice. I tugged on her arm again. The two thugs closed in. Ernie stepped closer and pulled the .45 from his holster.

The Japanese gangsters froze.

The yakuza have a lot of influence in Korea, but gun control is absolute here. They can't bring weapons into the country. Still, the well-muscled men spaced themselves around the lobby, ready to pounce. I had no doubt that each one of them was an expert in one martial art or another.

By now Ondo Fukushima had turned. He approached slowly, surveying the situation. Gradually, his face achieved an expression as fierce as a carved mask. The center of my gut felt as if it were being puffed with cold air.

Veronica took advantage of my hesitation. She twisted suddenly, before I could react, and kicked my knee, at the same time ripping her elbow out of my grasp. But instead of running toward the Japanese, she staggered backwards toward the waterfall.

By now the tuxedoed pianist had stopped playing. Behind the check-in counter and around the lounge chairs everyone stopped moving. I did hear fingers tapping out a phone number.

If Ernie and I were ever going to be able to keep Veronica's indiscretion quiet, we had to drag her out of here before the Korean cops arrived.

Two more of the Japanese thugs glided toward me. I pulled out my .45. They stopped. But a half dozen of them were arrayed around us now, waiting for a single mistake.

"Steady, Ernie," I said. "Don't fire unless you have to."

We all stood in a frozen but deadly tableau in the center of the White Crane Hotel.

"What are you *doing*?"

The voice roared out from the center of the Japanese thugs. And then I realized that the enormous sound had erupted from the small man in the glowing green suit. Ondo Fukushima.

I kept my voice as steady as I could. "She's coming with us," I said.

"She's *mine*," he bellowed. "I paid for her." He jammed his thumb into his puffed chest. "Me. Ondo Fukushima. A boy who used to steal from your American compounds. I bought and paid for the daughter of your commanding general. You're not going to take her away from me now."

His English was almost perfect. Only a slight accent. He was the right age to have picked up the language as a hustler outside the American bases during the occupation at the end of World War II.

"We're taking her," Ernie shot back.

"You have no right," Fukushima said.

Ernie wagged the barrel of his .45. "This says we have the right."

The Japanese thugs inched closer. Soon they'd be close enough to spring. Ernie and I couldn't possibly take all of them on hand-to-hand. Our only chance was to fire. But killing? Here in the middle of Seoul?

Ondo Fukushima, like a stalking carnivore, could smell our indecision. But before he could make

his move, flesh slapped on flesh, ringing through the silent lobby like the sharp peeling of a bell.

"*Cabrona!*" I understood immediately the Spanish cuss word.

I turned to look, still keeping my pistol pointed at the Japanese mobsters.

Private First Class Paco Bernal, wearing an ill-fitting black suit, had pulled Veronica away from us, right up to the edge of the waterfall. He slapped her again.

"You would go with them?"

Veronica pawed at his chest. "It was for you, Paco." She pointed at the stack of bills sticking out of her purse. "See I have enough yen here to cover the thousand dollars you stole. My dad will drop the charges. He'll have to. We'll be okay."

Paco Bernal was a slender Latin man, even better looking than he appeared in his pictures. He didn't care about us. He didn't care about the Japanese gangsters. All he cared about is what he perceived as Veronica's betrayal.

Ondo Fukushima turned his scowling face toward Paco. His lips were pursed so tight that I thought his face would burst with anger.

Behind us, men at the counter whispered the Korean word *kyongchal*. Police.

Now it was Fukushima's turn to wrestle with indecision. Time was running out. If he were to pull Veronica away from her lover just as the police arrived on the scene, he'd be arrested, and the whole world would know what had happened here tonight. Not that he'd do any prison time. His money and his attorneys would see to that. But

more important, much more important, he'd lose face. He'd look like the old man who'd been cuckolded by the goodlooking young foreigner.

The thugs were no longer planning on how to pounce on us. They seemed to sense the thoughts of their boss and backed away from our pistols ever so slightly.

In the distance, a siren wailed.

Fukushima made his decision. He barked something in guttural Japanese.

As if their batteries had been turned off, the Japanese thugs relaxed. Moving like one organism, they backed away from us, surrounded their boss, and headed away at a brisk pace toward the executive elevator.

Ernie turned his .45 toward Paco.

"Move away from the girl, Paco. Assume the position against the wall. You must be familiar with it."

As if waking from a nightmare, Paco seemed to see us clearly for the first time. Instead of pushing Veronica away, he hugged her close to him and then, moving so quickly that she couldn't react, he twirled her around, forcing his forearm up under her neck. From his pocket a gleaming blade of steel appeared.

The bayonet that had been missing from his field gear.

He pressed the tip of it lightly into Veronica's neck.

"Paco?" she asked.

"Shut up!" He turned his attention to me and Ernie. "If you come any closer, I'll slice her. I swear I will."

Ernie didn't move closer but instead moved to his side, inviting

me to fill the flank. I did. Paco jabbed the bayonet a little farther into Veronica's soft flesh, warning me to back off. I lowered the .45 to my side.

"You're a smart man, Paco," I said. "Up to right now you're only facing a theft charge. It's only money. Nobody's going to come down too hard on you. But if you hurt Veronica . . ." I let the thought hang.

While Paco stared at me, Ernie inched farther to his side and a little closer. I knew he'd take a shot at Paco's head if he got a clear one. He had to. An innocent person's life was in danger. And there was no way I could stop him.

Paco kept his eyes on me, still pondering what I'd told him. A moment of clarity washed over his face. His anger at Veronica faded. He was starting to see the enormity of the mistake he'd made here.

"Put down the bayonet, Paco," I said.

But at the same time Veronica seemed to be realizing that she'd made a mistake also. Her big green eyes were staring down at the glistening bayonet in terror. But she wasn't the type of woman to go down without a fight.

The sirens grew louder. Ernie inched even closer, keeping his .45 pointed at Paco Bernal's head. That's when I saw it, the decision in Veronica's eyes. At the same moment I saw her raise her high-heeled shoe.

I knew what she was going to do. I wanted her to stop. I wanted to cry out, but no sound came out of my throat.

She lifted her heel and stomped it down on Paco Bernal's toe. Paco jerked back. Ernie lowered his .45 and charged, ramming his shoulder into Paco's side.

Paco spun away from the rock waterfall, kept his balance, and grabbed the collar of Ernie's coat. With his free hand he raised the bayonet in the air.

I jerked my .45 up in front of me, flexed my knees, and shouted.

"No!"

Veronica slipped to the floor, Paco raised his arm straight up, but before he could chop the blade down on Ernie, the cold steel in my hand bucked and an enormous blast filled my ears and then the odor of burnt cordite billowed in the air.

Veronica screamed. A red hole burst open in Paco Bernal's chest. He reeled back toward the rock retaining wall of the waterfall like a yo-yo bouncing on a string.

More sirens, louder now, screamed behind me. Car doors slammed. Ernie was up, crouching over Paco. Veronica had stopped screaming, but her eyes ran with tears. She shoved Ernie out of the way, reaching for Paco. Ernie shoved her back.

She stumbled, rose to her feet, and charged at me. I was still holding the smoking .45 pointed directly at her. She knocked it out of the way and rammed both of her small fists into my chest.

"What have you done? Why'd you shoot him?"

She punched me two more times in the face. I just held my .45 pointed at the floor and didn't resist. Sud-

denly, she tired of me, kicked off her high heels, and ran in her bare feet back to Paco.

Ernie was trying to stop the bleeding that pulsed from Paco's chest. He looked around for a compress, noticed the wad of bills sticking out of Veronica's purse. He snatched them. "Here," he told her. "Press these down on the wound. Press hard! So the bleeding will stop."

Veronica knelt on the bloody floor and did as she was told. Ernie hurried over to me, grabbed my shoulders, and gazed into my eyes. Apparently he didn't like what he saw.

He moved me over to an upholstered bench against the wall, sat me down, and pried the .45 out of my fist. He took out the clip, stuck it in his jacket pocket, and put the empty weapon back into my shoulder holster.

"Don't move, George," he said. "You stay right here."

Then he returned to Veronica.

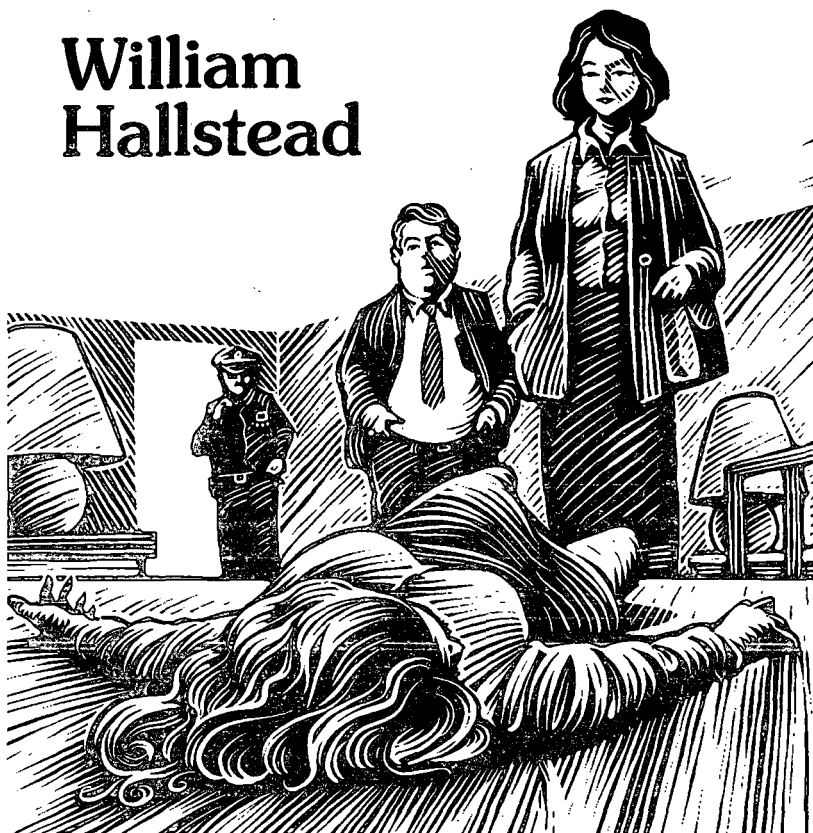
Even from this distance I could see the blood pumping through the stack of yen, seeping past Veronica's splayed fingers, dripping down Paco's side. I watched the gore ooze. Until it stopped.

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# CUT-AND-DRIED

William  
Hallstead



**O**n a slow night when Malabar Island Detective Kat Curtci and Detective Sergeant "Moby" Duckworth were on their second mugs of coffee, the call came over the radio speaker from Officer Sid Durnham, a uniform on routine patrol.

"I've responded to, ah, an apparent suicide by gunshot at 336 Sanseveria Lane. Who's catching? Over.?"

Kat strode to the radio setup in the corner of the near-deserted squad room and grabbed the mike. "Curtci and Duckworth on the way, Durnham. Secure the scene and stay out of it. Do you read?"

"Rog, but EMS is already here."

"Do the best you can. Curtci out." She banged the mike back down on the desk. "Let's get out there, Moby, before Durnham and EMS make a promenade of the crime scene."

"Who said it was a crime?" Duckworth muttered as they rushed for the department's unmarked Dodge.

"Reflex, I guess. You've got a point. Durnham did say suicide."

The house was one of the remaining one story ground-levels built before federal flood regs put later barrier island houses up on pilings. The place at this midnight hour was an island of light in a humid sea of inky black. Malabar PD required investigation of suicides, thus Kat and Moby's arrival on the scene. They parked behind two emergency vehicles—lights still flashing—and Durnham's green-and-white. He awaited them at the front door, a worried little man in Malabar chocolate brown, bareheaded, running his billed cap through fidgety fingers.

"Jeez!" Moby peered through the open front door.

"I told them, sarge. I told them EMS people to be careful."

On rational second thought, Kat wondered how you secure a scene with an ambulance full of dedicated paramedics thundering inbound in search of a spark of life.

"Fill us in," she suggested.

Durnham's bony face swung her way, looked up. Almost everyone in the department had to look up at five foot eleven Detective Curtci, which, she knew, aggravated the majority. Except Moby. A porky five seven or so, he was too near retirement to give a damn about comparative statures.

"You know them medics," Durnham pleaded. "The victim was still breathing when I got here, and they all barreled in. No use, though. Died just before I called you. Now they're packing up to leave."

"We're sure you've done your best." Kat resisted the temptation to pat the distraught and defensive officer on his sweaty little balding head. "Now, fill us in."

"Albert Brandenburg, he—"

"Brandenburg the contractor?" Moby put in. "The guy who built most of Leisure Estates over on the mainland?"

"That's the guy."

"He killed himself?"

"No, sarge, the victim is—"

"Victim?" Kat said.

"Sorry. I'm a little shook up." Durnham took a deep breath, blew it out in a shaky gust. "I'm a traffic ticket ace. Women shot in the head aren't on my regular agenda."

"Mrs. Brandenburg shot herself?" Kat inferred from Durnham's ramble.

"That's it. I got the mister to stay in the great room, but I couldn't do much about the paramed—"

They were already past him. Beyond the front door was a large low-ceilinged "great room," beigely carpeted wall-to-wall. The far end was mostly sliding glass doors that opened onto a blue-tiled patio and kidney-shaped pool. The outside lights were on back there. The whole place was

a blaze of light as if a flood of illumination might burn away the dark hover of tragedy.

Kat's attention was first caught by the cluster of paramedics leaving the bedroom to the left. Then, as she swept the room, she saw the man sunk in the wing chair near the glass doors. "Mr. Brandenburg?" she called.

He barely looked up, a big man with a florid face, now deflated, shrunken. A grief-laden man in maroon pajamas under a royal blue robe.

"Moby," she said quietly, "I'll do him, you do the body."

"Right," he said.

She knew he had no problem with her taking the lead, though he had the rank—he no longer cared about rank. He wasn't exactly coasting to retirement, but he wasn't bucking for anything, either. Made him easy to work with. Or, she sometimes wondered, was this his way of, well, seasoning her to the job? Could he be that subtle?

She pulled a straight-backed chair closer to the listless man in pajamas and sat down. "Mr. Brandenburg, I'm Detective Curtci. We are required to investigate situations like this. That's why Sergeant Duckworth and I are here."

"I—" Brandenburg cleared his throat. "I understand."

"I know this is extremely difficult for you, but can you tell me what happened?" She sat back. Waited.

Silence.

Then it came out in a monotone. "I was watching CNN on the set over there." He aimed a listless thumb at the big-screen TV in the opposite corner. "Heard a shot. Thought it was outside somewhere. Our bedroom door was shut. Then I wondered why Irma hadn't come out to see what it was. I went in the bedroom . . ." His voice dried into a croak. "In the bedroom. The lights were on, and she . . . she . . ."

"Your wife usually retired before you, Mr. Brandenburg?"

He nodded. "I stay up for the late news."

"At what point did you call 911?"

"When I saw the bullet hole. Took her pulse. Could barely feel it. I called 911 right away." For a normally robust man of about sixty, she judged, he looked awful. Cheeks a lifeless putty color, jowls slack, gray hair askew across his balding scalp.

"Was Mrs. Brandenburg depressed, distraught over anything serious enough to drive her to . . . this?"

He stared at her, apparently unseeing.

"Mr. Brandenburg?"

"This is a nightmare."

"Look, maybe we should let this go until tomorrow."

He shook his head slowly. "Like to get it over with now."

As if he could. Newspapers, TV; then lawyers, the IRS, the tide of paperwork. Death was not a private affair. "I wondered if your wife was disturbed, depressed over anything serious enough to—"

"No, no. Of course not. We were close. Very, very close. I really loved that woman. I don't understand this. I don't."

He sat there numbly, hands palms-up in his lap.

"Can I get you a glass of water?"

"I need something stronger than water. In the bar over there."

She found a fifth of Jack Daniel's, poured him three fingers in a squat glass. The parameds—three men and a woman who looked as if she could lift stretchers all by herself—watched Kat playing barmaid in bemusement. Moby appeared behind them and summoned her with a nod.

"Cut-and-dried," he told her as she joined him in the white-carpeted, Scandinavian-furnished bedroom. A large room, with its own glass exit to the rear patio now closed off with gold-painted Venetian blinds.

"Gunshot to right temple from close range. The standard quick exit."

In a pink silk nightgown Irma Brandenburg lay on her back, angled across the bed. Her naked heels dug into the carpet's rich pile. "For a woman in her late fifties or early sixties, she looks good," Moby said, "except she's dead." The wound was just above the corner of her right eye, a .25 or .32 caliber. "No exit wound," he pointed out. "Little pistols can do a lot of damage. Slug bounces around inside the skull."

The bed was still neatly made up. The whole room was crisply neat. Nothing apparently out of place. Except one thing, Kat realized.

"Where's the gun?"

"That's what the medics wondered. Me too. Took a while, but guess where I found it?"

"Couldn't begin to." Did they have a possible murder here?

"On your hands and knees, Bela. Take a look under the night table."

The "Bela" and "Moby" thing had begun when Duckworth discovered she had Transylvanian Alpine ancestry. "Bela LuCurtci," he'd chortled. She had regarded his impressive girth and christened him Moby.

Nestled in the deep carpeting beneath the nightstand was a snub-nosed revolver. "Know what it is, Bela?"

"From the odd front sight and unusual grip, I'd guess Charter Arms."

"Good guess."

"A better guess would be, what's it doing under there?"

"Recoil. Flung her arm out—see, it's stretched straight to the edge of the bed. Gun falls, bounces under the nightstand. It's only in the movies that it's still neatly in the gun hand with the finger on the trigger."

Not moving from beside the bed, she scanned the room again. "I wonder if our friend in the other room knows about that?"

"Come on, Bela. If he staged this thing, she'd be lying here gun neatly in hand."

"I still wonder."

"Hell, we can close this thing right now. Suicide confirmed—and go home. Or we can bring in the M.E. and his guys and end up drowning in paperwork over an obvious cut-and-dried, open-and-shut self-inflicted."

"You forgot 'black-and-white.'"

"That too." He frowned at her, chewed his bottom lip. "You're serious?"

"It's the way Brandenburg answered out there. A little too insistent on how much he loved dear Irma."

"Jeez, that's some wobbly peg to hang a case on." Moby ran a chunky hand across his thinning brown hair. Wobbled his head from side to side deliberating with himself.

She waited. She had seen this reaction before.

"I really feel for that poor bastard out there."

He shrugged. "Hell, okay. We'll wake up Doc Hewlett." To the medics he called, "Thanks, guys. You can go home. We're bringing in the medical examiner."

Hewlett, a banty rooster in khakis with an Orioles baseball cap hiding most of his white hair, didn't arrive until two A.M. Kat had suggested to Albert Brandenburg that he lie down in one of the guest bedrooms on the other side of the great room, but he elected to sit frozen in his chair.

The M.E.'s team of three swung into full press. They photographed, dusted for prints, vacuumed, bagged the yield. The body, encapsulated in black plastic, went out on their gurney. Not until three twenty-four A.M.—Kat had just looked at her watch—did they find the pillow.

Hewlett called them into the big white and chrome master bathroom. "Megargee just unearthed this, from the bottom of that clothes hamper."

It was a small decorative pillow, about twelve inches by twenty-four, with an edging of lace. A dainty little feather-stuffed pillow made significant by the hole in its middle, a powder-burned ragged puncture where the bullet had gone through.

"Anybody care to hazard a guess?" Hewlett asked roguishly.

Moby was already charging out to the great room. "Albert Brandenburg," they heard him announce, "you'd better get dressed."

"Cut-and-dried," he reminded Kat three days later, a blistering south-west Florida afternoon with the department A/C's flood of cold air rustling desk litter.

"So you've chortled daily," Kat shot back across their facing desks. "But . . ."

"Get with it, Bela. When you saw where the gun was, you thought he'd done it. Now that we have the evidence, you're thinking maybe he didn't? It's still open-and-shut: he shoots her through the pillow. That's why none of the neighbors heard it."

"They all had their windows shut and their air conditioners going. They wouldn't have heard it even without the pillow."

Moby held up a copy of her report, slapped it with the back of his hand. "Says right here when you interviewed an Edna Trumbell—"

"Next door neighbor to the west."

“—she let it slip that ‘everybody knew’ old Albert had something going with his sales manager. One Silvia Hansen. You interviewed Hansen, and she as much as confirmed that.”

“Agreed, Moby. Common knowledge, so common that the neighbor thought Irma Brandenberg knew it, too. Irma had turned ‘tight-lipped and sour’ as the neighbor put it.”

“You’re proving my case.” Moby moved his forefinger down the sheet. “You say here that lovable old Brandy lied to you about him and Irma being a happy twosome. You’ll be able to tie this up tick-tight with a look-see for Hansen gift tie-ins in his charge card records, maybe his bank statements.”

“Probably could.”

“So why aren’t you out there digging, Bela?”

She brushed back an errant raven-black strand. “Because I’m hung up on that damned pillow. Where’s the blood? A bullet impact causes blowback. The shot to her head should have left blood blowback on the pillow. But there isn’t any.”

“So he held the gun and pillow far enough away that the blowback wouldn’t reach it.”

“Not likely. Even if she were asleep, it’s too hard to aim through a pillow except from a few inches away. Another problem: if Albert shot her through the pillow, why did Doc Hewlett find traces of what is apparently blowback blood on the gun?”

“We’re working on that.”

“So I don’t think it’s so cut-and-dried. I’m going back to Sansevieria.”

She stood in the great room and pondered. They’d had an easy call until that damned pillow had shown up. Why, though, if Brandenberg were the doer, had he made the setup less obvious by shoving the gun under the table? She couldn’t accept his knowing that suicides can result in guns’ being thrown some distance. Something was amiss here.

She sank into a chair by the glass door expanse, stared at the crystal pool beyond. Either Albert did it or he didn’t. If he didn’t, Irma did. Or the proverbial bushy-haired stranger? Highly improbable given the locked bedroom door to the patio—unless Albert arranged to leave it open for a contractual shooter? Eliminate the wife and it’s clear sailing with the sales manager. But would a paid hit man plant that bloodless pillow?

Did Albert have an enemy or enemies unsavory enough to frame him? In her interviews she hadn’t turned up a single anti-Albert comment. A nice guy aside from his being an unfaithful husband.

If not Albert, it had to be Irma.

Kat stared unseeing across the patio’s china blue. The damned pillow . . . She let her imagination ramble, percolate.

The bedroom and bathroom had been minutely checked but not—was it possible? Not—



The garage was reached through the kitchen. Kat snapped on the overhead fluorescents. Two cars in there, a jumbo-sized black Mercedes, no doubt Albert's, and a smaller, Irma-sized gold-flecked Lexus. The Lexus's interior was immaculate. After three long minutes of searching, Kat's confidence in her bizarre theory began to erode.

Then she found it, wedged up under the passenger seat. A fluffy little feather.

Kat replaced her desk phone in its cradle. Gave Moby a thumbs-up. "That was Doc Hewlett. The feather's a match."

"Well, I'll be . . ." Moby's sunburned forehead rumped. "Better run all that by me again. It's a little complex for one take."

"My pleasure, sergeant. Irma finds out Albert is smitten with Hansen. Hates him for it. It's eating her up, their marriage is doomed. From her viewpoint her life is over. She works out a unique act of revenge. Not only will Albert be filled with remorse, a common suicide motive, he will be jailed—maybe even executed, the bastard—for murdering her."

Moby creaked his chair back on two legs, linked his fingers behind his head, and growled, "Can't imagine anybody coming up with a scenario like that."

"Because you've never been a woman scorned, Moby. She needs to hide evidence where it will be found. The decorative pillow from the bed stuffed in the clothes hamper should do it. Now she needs a bullet hole in the pillow."

"The car, Bela. How did you know to check the car?"

"She didn't want to chance the noise of the gunshot in the house, in the neighborhood. Her gun, by the way. He bought it for her after some break-ins in that neighborhood last year. So she drives out somewhere deserted, opens the passenger door or window, and shoots through the pillow."

"Uh . . . huh. Stays in the car because she wants to be able to get out of there fast just in case." Moby was coming around nicely.

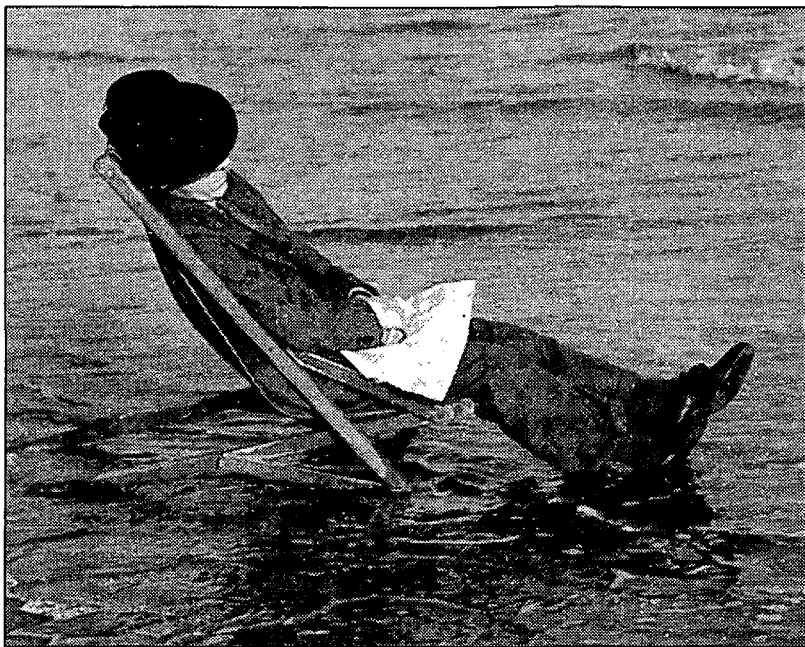
"Problem is, the shot blows out a bunch of feathers. She cleans them up but misses the one I found under the passenger seat." Kat stood, picked up her empty mug. "So that's why there's no blowback on the pillow, Moby. And that's why you're going to drop the charge against Albert."

Moby brought his chair back down with a thud. "Dammit, Bela," he said as she headed for the coffee urn. "At least I was right about why the gun was under the nightstand."

She grinned down at him.

"True, sarge. At least you were right about that."

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

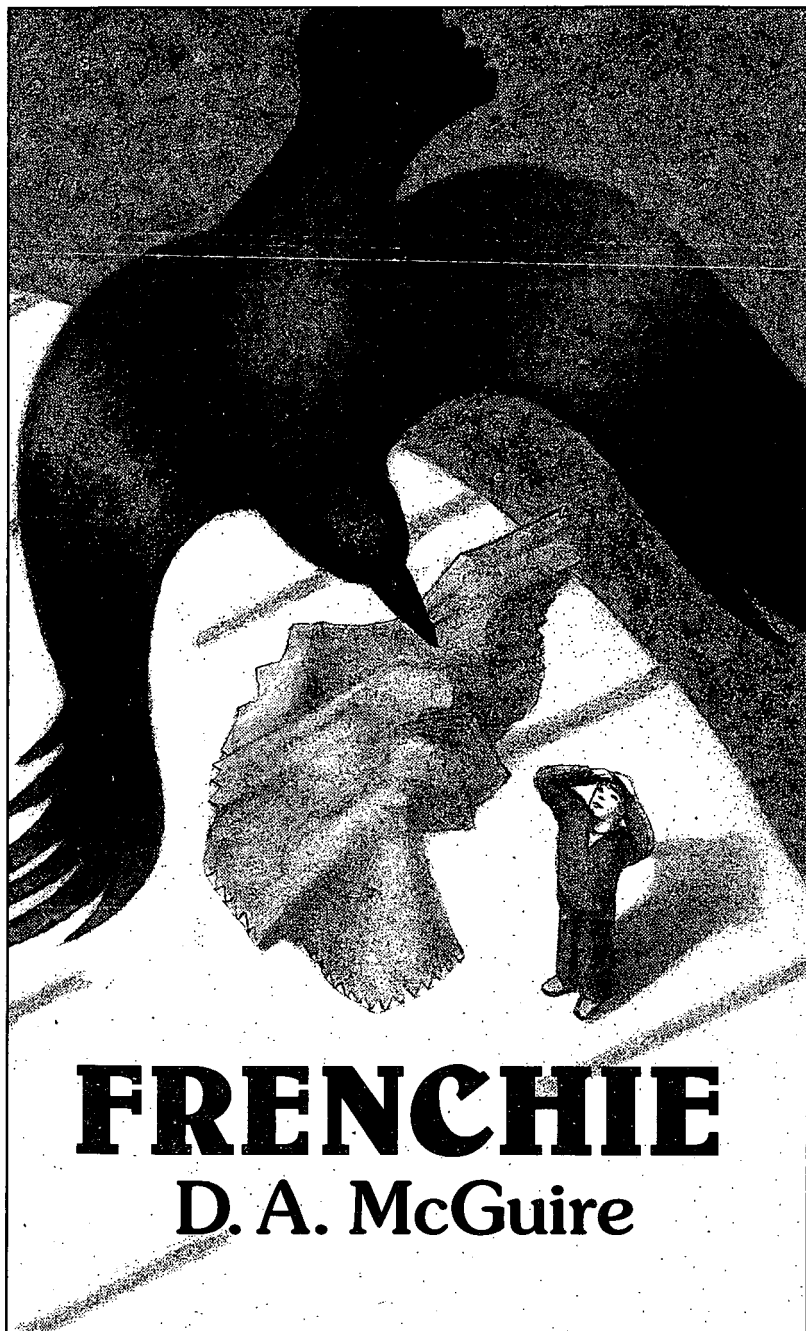


*Fox Photos/Tony Stone Images*

"But woe betide the wandering wight." We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "June Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

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The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.



# FRENCHIE

D. A. McGuire

*Illustration by Louise Goldenberg*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/00*



Potato chips; a sprinkling of cookie crumbs; an open magazine, some of the pages fluttering in the damp breeze off the canal; and the light, cool and muted as it often is in October, spilling across the faded bedspread and pale checked sheets: all these were signs that things were getting better.

And that the man propped up in bed, remote control in his trembling hand, was going to be okay.

I stood in the doorway waiting for him to see me, to growl, "All right, boy, I know you're there. Help me with this damned thing, will you?"

"Brought you a milkshake," I said, walking in, brown paper bag in my arms. Even though you're not supposed to have milkshakes, I wanted to add. (Or cookies or potato chips, for that matter.) I'd managed to smuggle the bag past the ill-tempered desk nurse; at any rate, she'd been more intent on my dirt- and grass-covered jeans, insisting that I step back outside to brush them off before I came in to see him.

"Damn thing," he went on, ignoring me. "Pay an arm and a leg in insurance for this place! The least they can do is get cable! Where's the damned History Channel?"

I could've helped, I suppose, and taken the remote away from him—he was still weak as a baby. But I decided to let him vent his frustration and find his own way even if it was just through the mind-boggling maze of channels, numbers, and confusion that cable companies wreak whenever they decide to change their access numbers, "for the convenience of the viewer."

Any learning experience was good for him, any sign that he was determined to overcome even the smallest of obstacles. His time of our helping him, of our being there for him almost around the clock, was coming to its end.

I glanced at the titles on the small bookshelf next to his bed: *Gulliver's Travels*, that had been a hard one to read, the language complex, the phrasing often archaic. And "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," that one I'd had difficulty plodding through though I'd rather liked it in the end, still carried pieces of it around in my head: "Water, water, everywhere . . ."

Others included *Billy Budd*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Seven Days in May*. My mother and Jake had wrestled their way through those. There was a handful of other books, too, but it had been these we'd read aloud over and over, the volumes we'd found dog-eared and riddled with notes, question marks, underlined phrases, on his shelves. He did not so much read the books he loved as devour them.

But best of all, Elmer Hornton was alive and healing and awake, though in the beginning, when he came out of the coma, it had been frustrating. Once he was finally conscious, it seemed that all he wanted to do was sleep. Perfectly natural, we were told; also natural for him to be weak, despondent, and confused.

"What the hell do you mean it's been three months? October already?" he had railed at Jake. "What do you mean some son-of-a-bitch knocked me off my ladder? I've been

in a coma? Got a broken hip? What the — is going on around here?"

Then he'd cried. That had been hard to take, so my mother had ushered me from the room, leaving a calmer, more composed Jake to explain.

But those days were behind us, thank God. Now it was just days of waiting and forcing patience—for all of us—as he gained enough strength to have his hip operated on. Then everything would be back the way it was before; he'd be his old cantankerous, interfering self, yelling at me, ordering me around his yard, his workshop. That's the way things were going to be; it was the way they had to be.

If we could only get through the next week or so. . . .

"Damn. Reenactment of the Battle of the Bulge." The remote fell on the bed among the potato chips, cookie crumbs, and other debris. He'd found his channel. "Who wants to see that? Prefer the real thing over what some moviemaker's gone and made up! What I want is a good documentary about World War II or Vietnam, something interesting." He looked up at me, Mr. Hornton, my old friend, who'd nearly died this past summer and had spent thirteen long weeks in a coma in the Northport County Rest and Rehabilitation Center. Few of his doctors thought he'd ever wake up.

He was seventy-six years old, a retired signpainter, a war veteran, and all alone in the world except for us, his friends, among whom were me, a worried fourteen-year-old kid; my mother, a widow and the closest thing to a daughter he'd ever had;

and Jake Valari, a detective on the local police force. Oh, Mr. Hornton had other friends, "war buddies" and "poker buddies" and "fishing buddies" who came and went with their flowers and their misty eyes. But few stayed around the clock like the three of us did, sitting by his bedside reading to him, or playing the cassettes we'd found in his house: Mitch Miller and his Sing-Along Gang, Lawrence Welk and his orchestra, Ray Charles. You'd expect those for a man of his age, but the surprises had been Garth Brooks, Shania Twain, and even (who'd have believed it?) Stevie Nicks.

But we'd played them all for him, sometimes as we just sat there, Mom with her knitting, me doing homework in my lap, and Jake with a newspaper or crossword puzzle at the small desk in the room. Other times it was quiet except for one low voice reading up close to Mr. Hornton's ear: "We loved our country as much as they; we went courageously into every action; but also we distinguished the false from the true, we had suddenly learned to see."

Other times, when I got there late after my job, I'd be so tired but still find a few minutes to read aloud, then work on my assignments as Mom or Jake finished what I'd begun. More than once I'd fallen asleep there beside the bed, been awakened by my mother's soft voice or Jake's huskier one: "Come on, Herbie. Time to go."

Also more than once I'd wanted to pause in my reading and, leaning over, breathe into Mr. Hornton's ear: "Don't you die. Don't you go away. I've got things to tell you . . ." But





with Mom and Jake always there, I never found the right time.

Now Mr. Hornton was sitting up in bed growling at me. "Well, get in here and talk to me! You don't know what it's like to be stuck in bed day after day with nothing to do! Damn, I'm so bored I could spit!"

That made me smile. There were some things I'd thought I'd never hear again.

"And hell, you look like hell. Is that how you come to visit an old invalid like me?"

He was looking me up and down, at the dirty, grass-stained sneakers on my feet, at my filthy jeans. Even my sweatshirt was covered with grime. I hadn't bothered to change because it had been getting late and I'd made a deal with myself, or with God, whatever, that I'd come and see him every day, no matter what.

"You're not an invalid, Mr. Hornton," I said, offering him the forbidden milkshake. "And I've got a new job. I'm cleaning up a yard and some buildings for a lady. You know, garage, attic, sheds—dirty work."

He gave an uninterested snort and took the milkshake with two unsteady hands. I waited, poised to grab the cup. His right hand was definitely worse than the left.

It worried me, that shaky hand. If he concentrated hard enough, the left would slowly cease its trembling, but not the right. Sometimes he'd slap it down on the bed with a snort, or a few vulgar words of frustration. If he'd suffered permanent brain damage (though his winning personality was certainly intact), or injury to the nerves in his arm, there was no knowing how he would

deal with it. Mr. Hornton was indeed a retired signpainter, but that didn't mean he no longer painted. He still did odd jobs on the side—boat and truck lettering, signs for small businesses, political banners, that sort of thing. In addition, he was proving to be quite a gifted artist in his later years, especially with portraiture and landscapes, the very talent that had gotten him into this predicament in the first place.

"So you got a dirty job," he finally said, looking at me. I reached forward with a napkin—there was a smear of strawberry milkshake on his chin—but he managed to clean it off with his left hand. "I'm off my feet for a few days and I lose my best worker, that what you're trying to tell me? You're not working for Angus McGee, are you? Damn the man! He used to steal away all my best painters!"

"No, not Mr. McGee," I said. "I told you, I'm working for a lady. Here, Mr. Hornton, I brought you something else." I reached for the bag I'd set on the floor by my feet.

I wanted to add "brought you something I hope it's not too soon for," but didn't. I pulled the artisan-quality sketchpad and the small box of drawing pencils from the bag and set them on the crumb-covered sheets.

Then I watched his face, saw the tight, angry wrinkles iron themselves out, the fatigue in his eyes fade away, and his left hand, which had started to tremble again, grow still.

"They say you've got at least another week before they operate on your hip. And you can't just sit and





read and watch TV. I know they take you out . . . ”

I glanced at the wheelchair in the corner. Northport County Rest and Rehab was situated on the canal right where it emptied into Manamasset Bay. On good days he was wheeled down to the water, where he could watch boats go through and the occasional fisherman try his luck in the swift currents of the canal. “But you need to do something to keep your brain working, so I thought . . . ”

He turned his head away, let it fall heavily onto the pillows.

“Hell, I’m all dried up, Herbie. An old man on his way out. Can’t even go to the bathroom and back on my own, have to call a damned orderly. There’s no dignity to life any more, just me and the History Channel now.”

“But you’ve got to try,” I insisted with all the faith of the fourteen-year-old kid I was. I’d heard my mother talking to his doctors just a few days ago; thus far, all the neurological tests on his right arm had come back “inconclusive,” though it seemed that . . .

“It’s useless!” he snarled, lifting his right arm. The whole length of it was shaking; he let it drop again quickly. “Might as well chop it off at the shoulder! What’s a man going to do without his good right arm, I’d like to know? Now this one—” he brought up his left, slammed it back down on the bed “—I could live without! But I’m a painter, dammit! How the hell can a painter paint without his painting arm?”

“Therapy’s not—”

“Therapy! Damn therapist comes

once, sometimes twice a day, doesn’t do one stinking lick of good! Move the arm up and down and back and forth, and attach those electrodes—which make it twitch for a good half hour after he’s done, by the way, and for what? For *what*? Arm’s still a quivering mass of jelly whenever I need to use it! How’d you like to be—well, anywhere—without the arm and hand you depend on? *You* try it! Force yourself to use your left hand all day long for everything! Try zipping your fly with your left! Try—” He’d sat forward during this little tirade, now collapsed against the pillows with a groan. Just the exertion of talking—venting—took a toll.

“Why, Elmer Hornton, I could hear you ranting and raving all the way down the hall!”

Startled, I turned to see a rather large, buxom, pleasant-faced woman in the doorway dressed in a nurse’s white uniform shirt and pants, her blonde hair piled high on her head in what my mother would have called a twist. She came right in, giving me a friendly smile as she did so. She marched over to Mr. Hornton with a tray on which were a pitcher of water with ice and what looked like a steaming hot towel.

“I don’t know if it’s good for you or not,” she said, giving me a sly wink. Her voice was deep and rich, almost husky. It was the voice of a woman who liked to laugh, who probably laughed a good deal. “But it certainly is good for me to hear some noise coming out of this room.”

I decided I liked this lady. She was overweight for sure, probably pushing two hundred fifty if not



more, but there was something about her that was both refreshing and comforting. Maybe it was her attitude or her gentleness with Mr. Hornton as she helped him with his pills, then his water, or maybe it was the way she adjusted his pillows, smiling as she did it, nodding to his various aches and complaints about the food, the TV, the bed, the windows (open too wide or not wide enough, I don't remember). She carried on a constant litany of "Well, let's see what we can do about that. Of *course* you're right. I'll try to find you a different—"

Fill in the blank: different pillow, different remote, different television set if you don't like the one mounted on the wall.

The food was bad again last night? Let's see what I can do for you, Mr. Hornton; I know the chef. . . .

And is it too hot, too cold? Fan on too low, too high? Well, let's see what we can do about that.

The woman was a marvel. If she were cloned, they could make a million copies of her and she'd sell out in one day. She even put up a cardboard pumpkin on his door and a cardboard cat on a gravestone in his window to make things look "bright and festive," she told him, "for Halloween."

I kind of stood apart while all this fascinating repartee was going on, but you'd have to be blind not to see that Mr. Hornton seemed really—well, *taken* with this lady. Big she was, no doubt about it, but professional, caring, and certainly very accommodating. MARILYN FRENCH, it said on her nametag, NURSE'S ASSISTANT.

Mr. Hornton called her Frenchie.

"Just started on this floor a week ago, but I've had my eye on her for a while. She's some woman, puts all the other RN's, LPN's and the rest of the medical alphabet to shame." He was nearly smacking his lips as she went out, empty tray in hand. "By God, if I'd found a girl like Frenchie forty years ago, I could lie right down now and die a happy man."

I think I was flabbergasted. Yeah, flabbergasted. Sure he still wasn't feeling good, and maybe (though it wasn't definite) he'd lost the use of his right arm. But had he lost his mind, too?

"You're kidding, right?" I said. I saw he wasn't. "Because, yeah, she's real nice, but Mr. Hornton—" I walked back to his bed frowning "—you've got to admit she's a little—"

"Yes? A little what?" he snapped at me; immediately I knew I was on shaky ground.

So I thought quickly: Plump? Overweight? Spent too many nights at Donut Delite? I cleared my throat, suddenly knowing that whatever I said was going to be the wrong thing. "Old," I said quickly. "I mean, she's got to be at least forty, don't you think?"

"And you think that's old?" He started to laugh but coughed instead. "Dammit, boy, you've got a lot of growing up to do, haven't you? That's young where I come from, and a mighty fine catch Frenchie is; she's going to make some man real happy whenever she puts her mind to settling down. Why, she can cook, don't you know? Brought me buttermilk biscuits day before yester-



day, and her Grape-Nut pudding, nothing like it. Plus she's a good looker. Yessirree, and if you push the bed over by the windows, I'll be able to see her go. She's usually off by three, must be working a different shift today." I was up against the bed at his urging, wheeling it back against the wall and then closer to the windows, which were covered by Venetian blinds. With a couple of grunts and groans and a clank of the blinds as metal snapped against the window frame, he pulled them halfway up so he could see out.

"Sometimes, if I lean forward just right, I can see her go. She's got a nice little gray coupe, foreign I think. Yes, that's a mighty nice handful of woman, smart, goodlooking, great personality, the whole package." He looked back at me, expecting me to challenge at least some of this . . . if I dared.

"I guess so, Mr. Hornton, if you say so."

"You think I don't know where your mind's at, don't you? You and this teenage nation of ours? I know you better than you think I do. You like them skinny. But skinny women are more often than not unhappy, miserable women—got to be, they're always so damned hungry! Me, I always preferred a full-figured woman, and when you get older, I can go into more of the particulars why."

"I guess it's like they say," I said, wanting to agree suddenly. "Different strokes for different folks."

"Hells bells," he said, waving his hand at me irritably. "You're not listening to a damned word I'm saying. What I am saying, and even you're

not too young to hear, is if you pass up a cheerful, pleasingly plump girl who's willing to jump through hoops for you for some skinny, scrawny, chicken-necked broad who's going to nag you your whole life, you're one damned fool. Aerobics and jogging and all that nonsense, who needs it? I'd rather have one that'll stay home, cook for me, and keep me warm at night! And that's the dang truth!"

"Guess that explains a lot of things," I murmured.

He'd been straining to look out the windows just then, gesturing for me to raise the blinds higher. It was a cool day, murky, raining off and on, typical mid-October weather at its worst.

"What's that?" he snapped.

"A good woman's hard to find. That the reason you never got married?"

"It's a good thing I'm lying in this bed because I'd slap you silly if I weren't," he snarled. "Listen to me and maybe you'll learn something. I haven't reached seventy-six without learning a few things!"

I really didn't want to argue even though it was good to see some spirit in him. Besides, he'd made himself very clear: he wouldn't find me criticizing Frenchie or any other woman any time soon.

"I think being stuck in bed, or maybe being hit on the head, has brought out the worst in Mr. Hornton," I told my mother as I walked into the house. "Never seen him so grouchy. God, one little comment he doesn't like and he's snapping my head off." I threw my dirty jacket



over a kitchen chair. The room was filled with typical fall cooking odors: baked apples, meatloaf, hot potatoes in a pot waiting to be mashed. My mother was a "damned fine cook," as Mr. Hornton would have put it. And she wasn't overweight.

"He's been through a lot," she told me as she pulled a tray of hot rolls from the oven. "How about cleaning up and giving me a hand."

"Sure."

I started for the small bathroom right off our kitchen just as another voice said, "He's just an old geezer, Herbie. Take it from me: all people get difficult when they get old, just a fact of life. Inevitable. It'll even happen to you some day."

I looked up. Our kitchen and living room ran one into the other with just a high, narrow counter between. But even from where I stood I could see Paul Fiore, my mother's new boyfriend, sitting on our couch, legs crossed, newspaper in his hands. He didn't even look up to say hello, how you doing, to me.

But then he wasn't up helping my mother either, and neither had he removed the baseball cap he wore whenever he was off duty. Paul was a firefighter in the neighboring town of Northport; he also played ball for a local team, the Northport News, on which he was star pitcher. As such, I guess he figured he could wear his cap wherever he liked, including inside our house. The man had no class, no couth, no manners.

He was just an all-around, out-and-out loser. I bet even the other firefighters in Northport thought of him as a loser; I had a hard time

imagining that anyone could really like Paul Fiore. The man had an opinion on everything and everyone; he was one of those guys who was always quick to tell you how something should really be done.

But worse than all that was that he had plans to marry my mother and move both her and me into his condo in Northport, which meant transplanting me into a new school system. I absolutely despised the guy; my mother knew it. He probably knew it, too.

"Paul's here for supper," she told me. "After you wash your hands, set three places."

"And pour me a glass of water, would you?" Paul called out without so much as raising his baseball-capped head. "With ice?" He lifted his eyes at that, found mine across the room. "Whenever I'm here, you seem to forget, Herbie, that I like ice in my water."

"Sure," I answered, struggling to keep the sarcasm, surliness, and censure out of my voice. "Ice. Two cubes or one?"

"Three'd be fine," he answered, smiling. "And I prefer bottled water; don't get it from the tap."

God, I hated him. Worse, he did know it, and it barely bothered him. Here he was sponging off us again. At the very least Jake, my mother's last boyfriend, always walked in with something—a freshly baked pie he'd picked up at the corner bakery, a bottle of wine, a six-pack of soda. Jake always helped out in the kitchen, too, making the rolls, mixing up a salad, or turning the steak and fries under the broiler. Jake was also a great cook: his spaghetti



sauce was so good it could have been bottled and sold in specialty shops.

But not this guy, Mr. Loser Fireman with the baseball cap and the attitude.

"Not all old people are that way, Paul," my mother said too pleasantly. "But Elmer Hornton has had an especially rough time. All the tests aren't in yet, but it is possible his right arm and hand are going to be virtually useless. It would make anyone irritable."

"Listen, Emily," Paul said in that condescending "I-know-better-than-you" tone. "I've worked with a lot of elderly, and I'll tell you most of them think nothing of bossing you around and criticizing everything you do. They'll sue you at the drop of a hat, insisting you didn't lift them right getting them onto the stretcher after you just saved them from a heart attack. But hey, it's not a job where you expect a lot of gratitude." He shrugged, returning to his paper. "I've gotten used to it."

"I know, Paul," my mother said so agreeably I wanted to strangle her. "You work hard. I've said it before: I could never do your job. It's dangerous, difficult, and rarely a word of thanks from the public. But someone has to do it. We're just lucky there are men like you."

"And women," I interjected, Paul's dark eyes on me again. "You do have women firefighters and paramedics in Northport, right?"

"A few."

"I can see why," I grumbled under my breath as I got the dishes down from the cabinet. "Who'd want to work with you, you're such a jerk."

It wasn't a great meal. Food was

wonderful as it always was, but the conversation was lousy. Paul wanted to grill me on my school subjects: how'd I do on the Spanish test? Did I get my lab report back yet? (Like he really cared.) It was all just an act for my mother, and when I responded with a bunch of barely audible mumbles and grunts, he got sullen, she got mad, and I excused myself before dessert. As I left, I heard him say, "Don't know what's wrong with that boy of yours. He needs a man's firm hand, Emily, to knock the chip off his shoulder. I still say that cop you used to date was a bad influence . . ."

I went out before I could hear any more, letting the porch door slam behind me, and walked all the way to the end of our road, out onto the jetty, and out to the farthest rock. There I sat for a long while watching the sun go down over Manamesset Bay until the sky was black.

**T**hat's about how my life was going that fall, like the weather: damp and cool interspersed with rare bouts of brief, too brief, sunshine. Like the letter I got the next day from a friend, a girl who was coming home for a few days, it being her private school's version of a fall semester break. Her name was Meggie Charlton and I hadn't seen her since the spring, and though it might be pushing things to identify her and me as . . . dating, or going together, I'd always felt Meggie was someone special and that I meant a lot to her, too. Quite possibly it was the only thing that kept me going the next week or so. School



was tough, lots of assignments, research papers, reading and writing. My after-school job was wearing me out both physically and mentally—cleaning out sheds and lugging leaves and grass might look like easy work until you do it three or four hours straight every day and longer on the weekends. And my personal life was pretty low. Mr. Hornton's attitude wasn't improving. Every time I brought up the art kit he just grumbled about losing his "one good arm" and about how he'd probably never draw again and said that once he got home he'd just prop himself up in a comfortable chair and watch the History Channel for the rest of his life. Depressing stuff.

As for my mother, if she wasn't preoccupied with work, having finally gotten the big promotion to personal secretary for the school superintendent, then she was spending more and more time with Paul the Loser. He'd show up in his all-terrain vehicle and start going on and on about its mileage and its handling and how he got the best deal on it—outsmarting the showroom salesman *and* the owner of the dealership (right!). Every guy on the force back in Northport, he said, couldn't believe he could swing such a truck on his salary. Because in addition to being the smartest guy in the entire Northport Fire Department Paul was also the shrewdest, being into investments "in a big way," he told my mother. "You've got to start thinking of putting money aside now, Emily, not only for Herbie's college but for your future," I heard him say one evening.

Then he went on and on about portfolios and treasury bonds and certificates this and certificates that.

Everything the guy said and did made me sick.

So when I got Meggie's letter, well, I must have read it a dozen times. I even put it under my pillow. Every time I felt a little down I thought about her letter; I even had it memorized.

The next day I found myself repeating lines of it as I struggled through a set of grammar exercises on noun-verb agreement. Mr. Hornton was at the window again, this time in his wheelchair. I lifted my head to look at him.

With the sun coming in behind him, all I could see was his silhouette, and what I saw I didn't like: an old man with a shawl wrapped around his legs, peering out a window at a parking lot full of cars, watching other people come and go. This is what his life had become.

"Mr. Hornton . . ." I figured I'd offer him a game of cribbage or maybe chess, keep his mind occupied if not his whole body. But instead he turned on me, hushing me up.

"Be quiet. Be quiet. I think that's him. No . . ." He had the cord to the blinds in his good hand and yanked at it ineffectively. "Damn," he snorted. "Damn this stupid cat!"

He had the Halloween decoration half pulled back so he could see past it; now he was trying to paste it back. "Herbie, come shut these damned things for me. She'll know I've been spying on her again."

So I did, reaching around him to push the decoration back into place,





then adjusted the blinds, lowering and closing them with a quick glance outside.

"Don't do that!" he snapped at me. "I don't want her to see us!"

"You don't want who—" Of course I couldn't help but look out, reopening the blinds to see, at the corner of the lot, a small gray car, a Subaru or Toyota, with a crushed-in rear panel. I'd noticed the car about ten minutes ago when I'd chained my bike to the rail outside. The woman getting into the car was unmistakably Marilyn French. But today someone was with her, standing by the driver's side.

"Tell me . . ." Mr. Hornton said, holding his breath. He was leaning back in the wheelchair as if she couldn't see him if she happened to glance this way.

'Course that wouldn't be true. The blinds were open, and the sun was nearly down. I'd had the light on to do my English, and if anyone had looked toward this window, they'd have seen me in a bright red sweatshirt, MANAMESSET MARAUDERS emblazoned across the chest, and Mr. Hornton in his wheelchair, his face pressed nearly to the window. "Tell me . . ." he said again, his voice nearly a whisper. "Who's she with? Is it the one with the long grayish hair, kind of squirrely-looking with close-set eyes, or is it the one with red hair?"

"I think it's the squirrely one," I said. The guy seemed to be arguing with Marilyn French, shaking his head, gesturing wildly. As for her, she was turned away—I couldn't see her face, but with her size there was no mistaking her. "Yeah, you

got him dead to rights, though I think he's definitely more weaselly than squirrely." I looked down at him, startled at how small Mr. Hornton looked to me just then.

Damn, to use his favorite expression, when had he got so small? Or better, when had I gotten so much bigger than he was?

Apparently Mr. Hornton hadn't picked up on the sarcasm in my voice. "Damn it all, I feel like that guy in the movie, you know the one? Sitting in a wheelchair, looking out the window, spying on all his neighbors. You know the one?"

I shook my head.

"'Course you do, by that famous English director! Damn it, Herbie!"

"Sorry, Mr. Hornton."

"Losing my mind as well as everything else I ever had going for me. Now what's he doing? Should we call the police?"

"Police?" I was totally confounded.

"That man is Dan Banner, the bastard," he snarled, looking right and left, and as he did, his hands, even his weakened right one, curled into fists. "Heard her talking to him on the phone in the hall yesterday, got her so upset she was nearly in tears. Damn! What I'd give to be twenty years younger! Son of a bitch!"

He'd finally got me going, too. "What's going on? Who is this guy?"

He tried to turn away but, unable to move his chair with his right arm, was helpless. I turned him around in the direction of the bed. "Dan Banner, useless piece of . . ." he deliberately muttered the last word. "Pardon my French! One of her boyfriends."



"Boyfriends?" I mumbled; luckily he didn't hear me.

"I've seen enough through that window in the last three days to make me want to spit. Gets her all worked up. Makes her cry. Treats her like garbage. Boyfriend." He looked up at me, nodding in a knowing sort of way. "Boyfriend."

"Abusive boyfriend," I filled in. I wasn't always a slow study.

"Not that she'd admit it. She's been on the day shift the last week, switched with a friend who's having car trouble. She had a split lip and a black eye when she came in this morning." I saw his face cloud up, quiver slightly. "Said she walked into a door. Oldest excuse in the world, and I ought to know, Herbie. I ought to know."

"Mr. Hornton . . ." I started to shake my head; there were things I didn't want to know.

"Not me, you goddamned little twerp!" he snapped, then ran his left hand over his eyes and face. "Damn it, Herbie, now look what you've got me doing, swearing at you. I didn't mean it like that. I hate to admit this now to a young boy like you, but then . . ."

His eyes came up, opening very slowly. "You're not a stupid boy; you've always known what's what." A quick nod, as though satisfied of my seeming maturity. "My father mistreated my mother physically, mentally, emotionally, and every other way. If she didn't jump when he said . . . damn." He gave a long, drawn-out sigh. "It's a difficult thing for me to say even now, forty years since my father passed on. But the truth is, he made my mother's life

a living nightmare, which is maybe why . . ." He looked across the room at a large and silent figure who had just entered. "So what is it, Detective Valari? Elmer Hornton's confession hour? Well, Jake, you're as close to a son as I've ever had, so why not say it? Been afraid all my life that deep inside I'm just like my old man, and that I'd misuse any woman who'd consent to be my wife, so to avoid that—" He turned around in the chair as far as he could, away from us both.

"Woman who works here, a nurse's assistant I guess her title is, well, Mr. Hornton thinks her boyfriend . . . no, that *one* of her boyfriends is beating her up," I explained to Jake.

"Elmer, you know you could never lay your hands on any woman to hurt her," Jake responded gently, "So what the hell are you jabbering about?"

"Her name is Marilyn French. Frenchie's a good girl and I've tried like hell to mind my own business, but I think it's time for me to be my interfering old self," Mr. Hornton replied, changing the subject. "I ain't saying I've seen the fellow lay a hand on her, but I've watched him out there shouting at her, getting her all upset. I suspect he's been pushing her around as well. Not much either of us can do about it, is there?"

Jake shook his head regretfully. "I can talk to the local authorities, Elmer, have someone speak to the man, but unless I see it myself, or she comes in and signs a complaint . . ." He shook his head.

"And neither of those is going to



happen," Mr. Hornton said wearily. He put a shaky hand out toward his bed, and both Jake and I moved forward to help him. "I heard her on the phone in the hall just the other day: 'I've got to do it, Dan,' she said. 'Don't try to stop me.' Damned woman probably thinks she's in love with the bastard!"

"Mom, did Dad ever . . ." I shook my head, barely able to believe I was thinking this, let alone asking it. In the corner of the room a cassette was playing softly, something by Enigma, another odd musical choice but this one hers. My mother looked very small and fragile there, sitting at the end of the sofa. Her arms were folded across her chest, her head was back, eyes shut. She'd heard me come in, said nothing.

Now her bright blue eyes were open, staring at me.

And here I was, trying to ask if the man she'd lost to leukemia at age twenty-nine, leaving her with a three-year-old son, no job, few skills, and a meager life insurance settlement . . . well, if that man had ever

...

"Did Dad ever what?" she asked.

"No, I'm a jerk for even thinking it, let alone asking." I dumped my books in a chair. "But I do want to ask you this because you're a woman and . . ." I sat down on the arm of the chair, facing her, thankful that Paul wasn't here, throwing his unwanted two cents into everything. "What makes a woman stay with a guy who mistreats her? I know all the usual answers you hear on TV and the talk shows and stuff.

They have low self-esteem; they blame themselves for the guy's bad temper, or they've got nowhere to go and they depend on him to pay the bills, or sometimes they've got kids and—"

"If you know all that, you don't need me to answer, do you?" she said very softly. "And your father wasn't like that. He only ever had to hit me once, Herbie, in all the time I knew him."

"He hit you?" I was on my feet. "Dad . . . Dad hit you?"

"Yes," she said, her voice so soft it was nearly a whisper. "Before we were married. Slapped me on my back and nearly broke my spine. I swear to this day he did do something to my left shoulder blade; it's never felt right since. He was a very big man, your father. Six feet six inches, strong, muscular . . ." Her eyes drifted off. "We were in a restaurant and I was choking on a piece of steak. We didn't know about that Heimlich thing then." She shut her eyes, then added, almost in a whisper, "Message on the machine for you, from Meggie."

Even when you've only got a little sunshine in your life, you leap at it when it comes. So as my mother quietly took her CD-player out onto the porch (even though she'd already heard Meggie's message) I raced for the machine.

"Hello, this is me, Meggie. I guess you're not there now, so . . ." A pause as I was thinking how do I save *this* message; can it be tucked under my pillow?

Pretty sappy, right, especially since this is what came next: "Look, I'm sorry I have to tell you this but



I'm not coming out next week for St. Bertilla's Day. That's the saint our school's named for and, well, I have to stay here, because . . . because of my roommate. She's going through a bad time. Her parents are breaking up and she's not going home and she'll be here at school all alone, so I figured she needs me more than . . . well, you know. But I *will* be coming out the next weekend, Halloween, and maybe we can get together or something? Okay. Bye."

I fell back on the sofa: gray clouds and rain again.

**“W**ell, Howdy Doody, it's Mr. Howdy Doody."

I thought at first that Mr. Hornton was referring to me (my hair is kind of a reddish-brown); I didn't realize he was in the wheelchair at the window again, spying on people. I hadn't had a very good afternoon; in fact the last half hour of it had been pretty lousy. I was standing in his doorway sopping wet. My book bag had just fallen off my shoulder, its zipper broken. I couldn't pick it up because my arms were full of bags, one with burgers and milkshakes, another with some books for him and a few cassettes he'd asked me to pick up at his house.

And he was insulting me?

"Now, this one I like. Even holds the door for her. What's with women they have to prefer the rough ones? Hey?" He was shouting at me; apparently I wasn't responding quickly enough.

But you know, I really wasn't in

the mood for puzzles or what passed for his wit, or for much of anything. I'd flunked a geometry test, gotten a minus grade on a lab report, and had several hours' worth of schoolwork to contend with this weekend: reading, Spanish exercises, an English paper to rewrite. ("Too verbose!" had been the bright red comment scribbled across the top. "Redo!") If I hadn't made a solemn vow to see Mr. Hornton every day, I wouldn't have been here now.

"Who's—" The burgers, books, cassettes tumbled out of my arms onto the small desk there. "—Howdy Doody?"

"TV personality. Early fifties, a puppet actually, had a sidekick, Mr. Green Jeans."

"Heck no, Mr. Hornton. I know my TV trivia!" I shot back, looking down at my English paper. It lay on top of the pile of notebooks on the floor. "Better than I know how to write, evidently. Besides, Mr. Green Jeans was Captain Kangaroo's—" I shook my head; I just wasn't in gear with him yet, my mind on so many other things including what I'd just seen outside in the corridor.

"Out there, out there!" he interrupted. "Come here!" He was waving me over with his hand. I left my clutter where it lay and walked to the windows.

Evidently he had discovered how best to sit at the window and spy on Marilyn French as she came and went each day. He had the chair to one side, parked at an angle, so he could lift the blinds or open them just enough that he could see out but anyone looking his way couldn't see him. I knew this by the way



he grabbed my arm, pulling me to his side, with a "No, no, not there. Stand here. Stand here."

So I did, backing into him and looking where he pointed: the dreary gray landscape, rain misting down, and Marilyn French standing by the driver's side of her gray Subaru in the arms of a young fellow in a yellow rain slicker.

For a moment I was totally confused. Just minutes ago I'd seen this same woman in the corridor with a different man, one of the center's workers. This wasn't that man; this guy was taller and kind of thin. He wasn't wearing workclothes and looked younger than she; he also had carrot-orange hair. The guy I'd seen her with not five minutes ago had been a dark-haired, stockier, shorter man.

"Now this is one I like. I knew damn well she could do better than that other one. Got manners, this one. Decent. Opens the door for her. Respects her. That's the key, respect. You ain't got respect, then all the love in the world don't matter a hill of beans."

"What is this with you?" I asked. "She the only one you're spying on? Isn't there a law about harassing people? I mean, Mr. Hornton, you're practically a stalker. Come on, give them some privacy for crying out loud!"

He made a noise, then said as he let the blinds drop, "Hell, maybe you're right. Still, I like that fellow. He makes her laugh. I've seen him teasing her, putting his arm around her. He's the right one. Wish I knew her well enough to tell her so."

"Right." I traipsed back across the

room, noticing as I did that the art supplies I'd brought were still in his closet, there on a shelf above where his shirts and pants were hung. "Look, I brought you supper, cheeseburger, fries, but that nurse at the desk, she's like a storm trooper. I don't know what's with women lately that I can't—"

He wasn't listening, and my mind flashed back briefly to Meggie's message on the answering machine yesterday and then to my mother as I'd found her when I got home from school this afternoon. She'd been sitting on the sofa with Paul, his arm around her shoulders while they watched an old black and white movie.

My mother hated war movies, but there she'd been, snuggling up to Mr. Know-It-All, watching John Wayne do his bit during the Big One.

So where did that leave me? Sitting with an ornery old man whose favorite pastime had become spying on Marilyn French and her "boy-friends"?

Not that I hadn't had any other offers today. It was Friday, and on my way out of school Remmy, an old friend, had asked if I wanted to come over to his house for a pizza, video games, rent a movie, whatever. Maybe Remmy had sensed I was feeling a little low, but I'd politely declined.

Which baffled Remmy: usually I smacked him on the shoulder with a "Not tonight, maybe later, Rem." Instead I'd just shook my head, said, "No, thanks," and gone out into the rain, book bag over my shoulder.

To home. To another sorry shake



of my head as I told my mother and a smug Paul in the living room that I'd be "eating with Mr. Hornton tonight, burgers." Two stops later—for fast food and a quick run into Mr. Hornton's house to collect the books and cassettes he wanted—my mother was dropping me off at the rehab center. The rain was now a kind of thick damp haze. There were only a few cars in the lot, employees' for the most part. I'd noticed that Marilyn French's gray Subaru was one of them.

"What time tonight?" my mother had asked me as I scooped up everything, pushed open the car door.

"Eight. Nine." I'd shrugged. It didn't matter, did it? That's what I wanted to say to her: did it really matter?

Yeah, what if I didn't come home? Would it matter any more to you? Because nothing I did or thought or said seemed to matter much to her any more. Because here she was, getting ready to make the biggest mistake of her life, and there wasn't one — (fill in your own adjective) thing I could do about it.

"Herbie . . ." She'd reached for my arm. I was wet, hadn't bothered to grab a jacket, was wearing a slightly sodden zippered sweat-shirt. "I'm sorry, Herbie," she'd said, keeping me there for just a moment. "About Meggie, I mean. I'm sure things will work out when she comes home."

"Yeah," I'd said, sliding out of the car. "Don't they always?"

Two minutes later I'd been struggling through the rest home's lobby, getting my usual scowl from the desk nurse there with a "Wipe

your feet; don't drip on the floor; it's newly polished," followed by "What's in that bag? Are you sneaking food into Elmer's room again? The doctors aren't happy about that, and neither are we."

I'd just looked at her over the counter she sat behind. She was a dull, gray, lifeless-looking woman, but why did life have to be so full of such disagreeable people? Wasn't the weather miserable enough for them?

"I've got my supper in the bag," I'd told her as rudely as I could, modeling myself after one of the toughest kids at school. This wasn't the real me; it wasn't even close to the real me, but it got me what I wanted. "And if you've got a problem with that, I'll tell—" I had to nearly bite my tongue to get this out—"Elmer that you'd prefer he have no visitors." Damn the woman! The way she looked at me, like I was some kind of insect. And where did she get off calling him Elmer? I'd known him for going on six years, and I still called him Mr. Hornton.

"No reason to get testy, young man," she'd said, her tone softening somewhat as she shoved the sign-in sheet toward me. "Just be sure you don't track mud all over our nice clean corridors."

Clean corridors: they were still being polished as I'd walked down the hall to Mr. Hornton's room. The guy had been using a big polisher, whipping it right and left, stopping only to . . .

I shook my head: now I was standing in the room, looking down at the books, notebooks, papers, and folders that had spilled out of my





book bag. Something was wrong with the bag's zipper; it wouldn't pull all the way around. But something was wrong with what I'd just seen outside in the corridor, too. Damn (to us an over-used word), suddenly all I wanted to do with my stuff was kick it across the floor.

Mr. Hornton said, rich satisfaction in his voice, "He's new, that one, and I like him, yes I do. He's taking her keys now, must be going to borrow . . . oh yes, she's got my blessing on that one. Damn nice fellow."

Yeah, what was it with women? I couldn't figure any of them out: the witch at the front desk who existed just to make my life miserable; my mother, who seemed set on picking a loser for her new husband; Meggie, who I just knew was lying to me.

And Frenchie, or Marilyn French, whom I'd caught kissing the maintenance guy polishing the floors in the outside corridor.

I'd seen him put his hands around the sides of her neck, give her a little shake, then lean forward and kiss her quickly as she said, "I've decided, Vinnie. I'm going to wait. I'm not going to do it."

I turned away from the mess I'd left on the floor. "Hey, you up for a game of cribbage?"

**I** saw the crows first, not that you tend to notice crows on the Cape; seems they have to compete too much with the gulls for scraps of food and all the other junk people throw at trash containers. On the Cape, if you've got trash, food trash, then you've got gulls.

'Course, if you've got sandwich wrappers or old shells with bits of flesh hanging onto them or even fish heads, you've got gulls, too. I've seen them at the canal, flapping away lazily as you go to toss your can or bottle into the recycling bins. Crows just can't compete with gulls, not the way gulls hang in packs.

So to see the crows walking back and forth at the edge of the parking lot seemed kind of strange. Where were the gulls that the crows got here first? Because it was obvious someone had missed the trash container again: one crow had a piece of thin white paper in his bill, the kind of wrapper that goes around a sandwich or burger from a fast-food place.

Then I saw another crow with a piece of something white in his bill—a large piece of something, half a sandwich from the look of it or maybe a bagel or, no, it looked like one of those muffin things you can buy for breakfast with ham and cheese, or sausage.

I let my bike slam down onto the pavement and started toward them, and they flew off, screaming at me as they did.

How did I know something was wrong? How does anyone ever know? It's just a feeling in your gut, like someone has poked you there, some tiny, minor thing is just . . . awry.

Like the fact that no one could have that bad an aim: there were two bags of white muffin things scattered all over the pavement.

And seldom did anyone throw away so much food, not even to the birds.



I leaned over to pick one up—it had a piece of ham and cheese still clinging to it—and looked over to the edge of the parking lot.

Just beyond the metal barriers that defined the lot (and protected drivers from inadvertently driving into the canal), the ground sloped down, giving way to an area of overgrown brush: red winged sumac trees, wild beach roses, and even a few scraggly-looking juniper trees, their branches loaded with pale blue berries. The whole area was rocky, too, and covered with the local nuisance vine, bittersweet, that I'd often collected for my mother when she was in one of her creative, think-I'll-make-a-wreath-for-the-door phases. Bittersweet, annoyingly tenacious as it is, has bright red berries with golden skins. The skins kind of peel off in mid- to late fall, revealing a bright scarlet color underneath.

Anyhow, I knew this area alongside the canal pretty well, and for a moment I figured that some person—some slob, that is—had dumped a bag of trash down the rocky slope, maybe aiming for the water.

But then again I had that strange sensation in my stomach that something here wasn't right, and when I got to the edge of the lot, I paused, swallowing deeply. For there, between the wild beach roses and a tangled mass of pretty bittersweet, lay the quiet, prone figure of Miss Marilyn French, facedown in the jagged rocks.

I couldn't sit; the ground was wet, so I kind of perched on my legs, one knee on the broken picnic bench at

the edge of the lot. I'd watched them come and go: police first, then a single firetruck, and an ambulance. I'd kept my distance as men and women climbed down the slope gingerly, wrestling with their stretcher and equipment, then watched them clamber back up, stretcher empty. Shortly thereafter the county medical examiner came and went, scratching his head beneath his baseball cap. He even looked at me and nodded, perhaps recognizing me from some other crime scene sometime in the past. Or maybe he was just a polite man, who knows?

Though I could have told him she was dead. No one could have survived what had happened to her, not the way the back of her head looked caved in, which was the real reason I'd been out here so long. I'd been too afraid, too big of a coward, to go into the building and tell Mr. Hornton what I'd discovered, and what undoubtedly he'd been told by now.

Probably one of the home's workers had told him, maybe one of the people who were standing around at the edge of the parking lot, huddled up in their too-thin fall coats, the mist greasing their hair and painting their faces in the damp. Overhead the skies were even grayer now, almost black, but no one seemed to be complaining; in fact, everyone was eerily quiet.

Because this seemed something that had to be done out in the rain, and that being uncomfortable for a few minutes, well, that was to be expected whenever you found a dead body stuck in the bittersweet at the edge of the canal.



When these people finally conferred, their heads bunched together in the rain, I was too far away to hear them.

The police were down there for a long time; then the crime scene van from the state police barracks arrived, technicians jumping out with their cameras and plastic bags to move up and down the slope. The ambulance and police cruisers finally drove away, leaving one lone fire-truck and the crime scene van standing vigil over the site. It wasn't for another hour that a long black sedan pulled up . . . local funeral home.

I just waited and watched, mulling over in my mind what I should be doing, or rather, what good I could be doing. I'd called home, left a message; my mother was out, of course, it being Saturday. The only thing I was grateful for was that this was Paul Fiore's day off, too, so he wasn't among the last of the Northport fire department who were milling about, awaiting the official word that they could go home.

But I should have known. Paul kept his scanner on all day and had friends in the Northport fire department who'd be certain to call him about a situation like this, so when his green Cherokee jeep pulled up, tires screeching, it should have come as no big surprise. What *was* a surprise was that my mother was with him, and as she came tearing across the lot to me, Paul went to join his cronies and colleagues at the edge of the water.

"Back of her head completely

smashed in," Paul said as we stood in the lobby of the rest home. I was just standing there, quiet and wet, wanting only one thing: to get out of there. I was proving to be worse than an absolute coward; I was being an absolute heel. But what could I have done differently? Gone in and told Mr. Hornton . . . what?

That the friendly nurse's assistant he'd taken such a liking to had been killed and shoved down the rocky side of the canal? Was that supposed to be my responsibility? What little joy Mr. Hornton had had in the days since coming out of his coma had consisted of watching Marilyn French, his "Frenchie," as she came and went, she with her numerous boyfriends, including the one who . . .

Oh, I'd already given the Northport police my "statement," been dragged into the office of the rehab center's manager. There I'd sat in front of a large metal desk, facing a bedraggled, gray-haired cop who'd probably rather be just about anywhere—including traffic detail—than questioning some teenaged kid about a possible homicide.

"So, seen nothing?" he asked, chewing on a thick wad of gum.

"Just the body, sir." My reply.

"I mean, anybody in the lot when you rode up at—" checking his notepad—"six fifteen A.M. Kind of early, isn't it? I mean for a kid your age. Don't you like to sleep in?"

"No, sir." My ready answer. "I got things to do on Saturdays."

"Hell," the man snorted. "Lucky if my kid gets up by noon; gotta yank him out of bed on school mornings." A deep sigh. "No one in the lot when



you got there. No car leaving. No, er, suspicious activity of any kind?"

"Just the crows, sir." I crossed my legs and sat back, realizing that, strangely enough, I felt very comfortable suddenly.

"Crows," he said. "Crummy birds. And you touched nothing, that right? Didn't go down and check the body or anything? Didn't pick up anything, move anything?"

"No, sir," I said with a quick nod. "I know my police procedure. I watch television."

"Smart ass," the guy said, scribbling something on his pad.

"We just got done talking to some of the patients here, couple of the workers," he said. "Seems that the deceased, Marilyn French, might've had a problem with an old boyfriend. According to—" a glance at the pad again "—a relative of hers, a brother who works here, she just broke up with the guy. It's too bad, for the brother, that is. Guy's pretty cut up about this. When he heard, he just about fell apart." A shrug. "Who wouldn't?"

"Then there's her nursing supervisor and a patient she worked with. They both say this fellow, Dan Banner, had been bugging her here at work, both on the phone and out by her car. I wouldn't really be telling you all this—" he looked up at me, chewing on his gum like it was a cow's cud "—except that according to a Mr. Elmer Hornton, you can corroborate some of this, too."

"Yes, sir, it was Dan Banner. I saw them arguing in the parking lot one time. Mr. Hornton, he also saw them—"

"I already know what Elmer

Hornton saw, or said he saw, boy. I just want to know what you saw."

"Of course . . ."

So I told him how we'd spied on her and how she'd had at least two boyfriends, one who seemed to treat her right and one who didn't.

Then, with a cursory word of thanks, the cop dismissed me.

Now I found myself in the lobby with my mother while Paul spoke to a couple of Northport cops he seemed to know. There were workers milling about, some confused-looking nurses, a janitor, and the manager of the center. This last person, a heavyset man with a quivering lower lip, didn't look all too happy that one of his employees had been found dead outside. As we stood there, a man dressed in a dark green custodian's uniform was escorted out of the manager's office by a nurse and another man, also dressed in green. He looked like he'd been crying; both his hands were over his face.

Even so I recognized him as Paul walked over and coolly commented, "Deceased's brother. Taking it kind of hard."

He was the same man I'd seen Marilyn French kissing in the hall yesterday afternoon. The floor polisher.

It was then that I, the coward, wandered over to the center's front windows—they looked out upon the bay, the canal, and the stormy black waters the wind was whipping up—and watched the rain as it pummeled down. I was wondering what kind of evidence a downpour like this was destroying, washing into the bay, or down into the rocks



where the gray rats prowled. I supposed it was just as well I'd found Frenchie when I had; those rats—and the crows picking over the muffin things—would soon have found her, too.

I shook my head, swallowed; behind me I could hear Paul and my mother talking quickly, softly, voices rising sharply, then dying down when I glanced in their direction.

"... tired of him being mixed up in these things," I heard Paul say. "Listen, Emily, I'll take care of this."

And my mother, her voice struggling to remain calm: "But Paul, Herbie can hardly be blamed for—"

It was as if she weren't there, for suddenly Paul Fiore was staring down at me like a drill sergeant at a recruit, searching me for a weakness, an opening, an edge.

I was determined to give him none.

"Time to go home, Herbie," he said in his best, most self-righteous tone. "You've done your part, told them what you know. What happens from here on has nothing to do with you."

I looked over at my mother standing there in her thin raincoat, hands cupping her elbows. When she was dating Jake Valari, she'd seemed so vibrant, so vital, so full of energy—and argument. She'd never have let Jake do her talking for her.

"I'm going to hang around," I told Paul, "in case the cops need me for anything else, plus I want to see Mr. Hornton—" I sighed—"before I go."

"The police don't need you for anything," Paul said, his voice thick with condescension. "I know you've

been—" a smirk across his thin lips "—involved in things like this before, but this time let's leave it to the professionals. Your days of playing junior detective are over, Herbert Sawyer." He gave a snide glance to my mother. "I think the police here in Northport take their jobs a little more seriously than the ones in your hometown." Back to me. "Now, let's take your mother home. This is no place for a lady, either."

My response to that? Just to walk past him, not in the direction of the outer doors but toward the long corridor leading to Mr. Hornton's room. Coward or not, I couldn't leave Mr. Hornton without at least saying something.

Besides, I had to get away from this jerk before I said, or did, something I would regret.

"Herbie." Paul reached out, grabbing my shoulder.

I stopped, turned just my head, looked at him, said, "Let go of me."

"You're coming home with us, son," Paul said, the expression on his face tight, taut, anything but friendly. "You've given your mother enough sleepless nights. She and I have talked. It's time you kept your nose out of other people's business, and if it takes a man like me to persuade you that that's the way it's going to be, then that's just the way it's going to be."

Paul Fiore was no lightweight. He was over six feet tall, a well-built and powerful guy, which made my subsequent action seem either utterly foolhardy or possibly the bravest thing I'd ever done.

Because I swung around, not to hit him but to knock his hand off



me with the heel of my own hand. Okay, so he was a huge man but no martial arts expert, and he certainly wasn't about to cause a commotion by grabbing me, especially with my mother and all those other people standing there:

"Paul!" my mother cried out.

I used the moment to walk swiftly away, muttering so they could both hear, "What a jerk."

"Not my case, not my jurisdiction," Jake told me as he crossed his legs, reached into his jacket pocket for a cigarette. I would have sworn he'd put on twenty pounds since he and my mother had stopped dating; he had trouble just folding his arms across his chest. "Happened in Northport, Herbie, not Manamesset. Not much I can do but render assistance if and when it's asked for, and it hasn't been asked for."

I sat forward, running my fingers through my hair, shaking it out. I'd gone in to see Mr. Hornton, for all the good it had done him or me, then left the rehab center by the employees' back door, walking all the way down the canal access road and cutting across the Manamesset Bridge. From there I'd hitched a ride to the Manamesset police department with a kid I knew from school.

A towel hit me in the head, and I thanked the officer who'd tossed it to me from the door, then looked back up at Jake.

"Oh, I heard all about it, got the calls on the radio," Jake went on, "So I did a little research. The woman, Marilyn French, had an apartment here in town for a while until

she moved into a duplex in Northport. Worked in Quincy for a while, then got a job at the rehab center apparently on the recommendation of a relative, a brother." He seemed to be searching the ceiling for all this information, then looked down on his desk to an open notebook.

"Seems like more than a little research," I commented wryly.

He shrugged. "I've got friends. I was curious."

"So she's on the level. No record, no criminal past?"

"Just a lady trying to make an honest living."

"With a fondness for muffins," I muttered, slumping forward again. I thought back, looking over that misty parking lot as three technicians from the crime scene van climbed out, two heading down the slope with cameras and evidence bags. The other one had headed for the trashcans where the crows had been picking apart the remains of . . .

Marilyn's breakfast? Yeah, and the Northport Police must be checking out every fast-food joint in town that sells muffin sandwiches in that generic white paper wrapper.

"And an abusive boyfriend." Jake pulled his chair up to his desk, leaned forward over it.

"I told them what I knew about that." He nodded.

"One of the first things they'll be checking out. Interviews with her co-workers, patients she cared for, her friends, relatives, neighbors. But I've got to admit this boyfriend seems the likeliest suspect. They've got his name; they'll pick him up, figure out where he was, check his





alibi, if any. All very straightforward police work."

"It stinks," I said, shuddering. I was cold under my wet clothes. Something else hit me in the side of the head, and I turned, seeing Officer Fred Andersen, an old friend, standing there smiling. I looked down at the floor: a regulation police jersey and pair of sweatpants. I gave Fred a nod and a smile, then said to Jake, "I've got things to think about, Jake. Maybe I could stick around here for a while?"

He jerked his thumb in the direction of the door.

"Go get cleaned up and change into those clothes; I'll have a pizza sent over and you and me can talk."

"Water, water everywhere . . ." I said as I combed out my hair, stared at myself in the steamed-up mirror over the narrow sink basin. I ran my hand over my chin, down both cheeks: nothing. Outside the rain had grown into a mid-fall gale, clattering against the air conditioner attached to the window, banging against a rain gutter somewhere, tapping the windows like a steady sleet. And I've got things to think about, I told myself, wondering briefly if the color of my hair were red—or brown.

I'd taken the liberty of showering, then pulled on the blue jersey and black sweatpants Fred Andersen had thrown me. Both were too big but not by much. I checked the sizes: men's medium. Then I sat down on the edge of the toilet seat cover and reached for my socks. I'd shoved them inside my sneakers, which were sodden, but as I tried to pull

one sock free, the sneaker came with it.

"Great," I said, tugging the sock loose; the filthy, wet sneaker fell to the floor . . .

And with it a gray, torn, smudged-looking piece of paper.

I ran the hair drier back and forth over the strip of paper. It was exactly what I thought it was, and I considered this question for a moment: what was the penalty for removing a piece of evidence from a crime scene? What if you did it accidentally?

And worse, what if you did it accidentally but then, on discovering it, didn't turn it over to the authorities?

I'd stepped on it, and it had stuck to my sneaker, been there the whole time I'd watched the police and paramedics arrive, the medical examiner, all of them. Been stuck there, too, when I'd shoved Paul's hand off my shoulder and gone in and tried, unsuccessfully, to talk to and console Mr. Hornton.

"The Muffin Mart at the Rotary, Manamesset. 5:33 A.M. October 24. Your server is Shannon, A. M.'" I read softly. "Two sausage-muffin specials, one ham-muffin with cheese. Thank you and come again."

The Muffin Mart was new, one of a half-dozen similar fast-food places that had sprung up all over this part of the Cape. It was a walk-in, had no drive-through window. And as such was the kind of place where a "server" like this Shannon might remember Marilyn French and who, if anyone, was with her because three "muffin meals" seemed



a bit too much even for a woman as generously proportioned as Marilyn French had been.

For a moment I was transfixed, staring at the strip of paper. Well, the Northport police, not to mention the state police, were checking every place around that served this kind of sandwich—weren't they? And if she'd bought breakfast for herself and someone else, maybe someone would remember whom she'd been with.

The strip of paper was dry now and brittle. I folded it carefully, tucked it into the deep hip pocket of the sweatpants, and, socks and wet sneakers in hand, returned to Jake's office.

"Yes, he's here . . ." Jake, on the phone, looked up at me. His eyes told me he was talking to my mother. "'Course I'll bring him home. Yes, yes, it's been another one of those days. I understand, Emily. I understand."

I said nothing, glanced at the chair in front of his desk, a pair of clean, dark socks sitting there, a pair of white Keds with black inserts. Wonder where those came from? I didn't wonder long, just plopped myself down and started to pull them on.

Jake turned away from me, phone still to his ear, as though I couldn't hear. "No, Emily . . . Em, he's not involved this time, just a kid in the wrong place . . . again. I'm not even . . . no, not my jurisdiction, Em. And I'll get him home. I . . ."

And on and on he went as I stood up, wet sneakers and socks under my arm—

And walked out.

The Manamesset Bridge Rotary's not that far from the police station, a decent hike but not unmanageable. I'd just hitched a ride from that way an hour ago; now, wearing Jake's yellow rain slicker (lifted from his car in the police station parking lot), I made the walk back in something over twenty minutes.

Wondering as I walked why I was doing this and what compelled me. This wasn't Jake's responsibility, it certainly wasn't mine, but all I could see in front of me in the rain was Paul's smug, conceited face, his expression, his eyes, his . . .

Arrogance. And assuredness. That whatever he wanted he would get, be it me under his control—or my mother. Yeah, I guessed that was it: hate. Hate forced me to the new Muffin Mart on the rotary just this side of the Manamesset Bridge, that plus my believing that if I walked in, asked for Shannon, and she was a young kid like me, she might be more comfortable talking to me than a pair of Northport cops or grim-faced state troopers.

Yeah, it was hate, that and my own arrogance.

Besides, anything I found out I'd turn over to Jake immediately, and he could turn it over to the Northport authorities and everyone would go home happy . . .

Except for Mr. Hornton, curled up in his bed, shawl tucked under his chin, staring at me slack-jawed, eyes full of dark disbelief that the large and lively but caring woman he'd called "Frenchie" had been found dead down by the canal.



And my mother, her own eyes darkened by something else, maybe the realization that life wasn't turning out the way she'd wanted so she was reluctantly preparing to accept second-best.

"Hey, cutie, what'll you have?" It was a young voice belonging to a peppy-looking girl with long brown curls. She had a rag in her hand, was wiping down the counter near the cash registers. It was getting on for three in the afternoon, not exactly a big muffin time but they seemed to be doing a pretty brisk business in coffee and sweetrolls. The place was full of truckers.

"I'm just wondering—" I was at the counter, water dripping down my arms off the slicker—"if Shannon is working today."

"Shannon?" Her entire forehead wrinkled up. "Are you . . . a friend? Or are you looking for a job?"

"No . . ."

She'd already come around the counter and walked toward the plate-glass windows, rain pouring down them. A couple of truckers lifted their heads, looked her up and down as she turned back to me.

"Still busy, I think, but I'll take you to the office. Come on."

I followed her down a narrow corridor into the back of the building toward the restrooms, then to another door that read **MANAGER**.

She left me there, saying, "Just knock when the cops come out, okay? We're always looking for help here. We just can't seem to get help or keep help when we do get it. See you later." With a flash of bright white teeth she sashayed her way back to the front of the restaurant.

Now, I like to think I'm a pretty bright guy, but—maybe I was just too distracted by other things. The letters A. M. after Shannon's name should have made me think, but I'd ignored them. Shannon, whoever she was, was not only a worker here, she was probably the assistant manager. Damn!

Damn again, and the cops had gotten here before me.

What I should have done then was either trek back to the police station and turn the strip of paper over to Jake to do with as he saw fit, or . . .

Wait here and hand it over to the two cops as they came out, for certainly we were here for the same reason. Suddenly the door opened and I moved back as two wet, tired-looking cops, local Northport police officers, stepped out.

"Sorry to be any trouble, sir," one of them was saying. "But if you or any of your help do remember seeing this woman . . ."

I was still standing there like I was waiting to use the restroom. The cops didn't even give me a glance.

" . . . please give us a call."

"Well, like I said . . ." A voice answered, a man's voice, but I couldn't see him; he was just inside the office door. "I was alone on the counter around six this morning. Two of my people called in sick; the rest I had in back grilling food. It's a real busy time of day for us, so I can't be one hundred percent sure, but I think I'd remember this one. Big woman, you say?"

"Yes, sir," the other officer said. "We're checking out every fast-food

place in the area. She could have bought her breakfast at any of a dozen places." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "Her car is missing, too, not that you might notice but you get a lot of traffic in and out of here. It's a 1994 four-door gray Subaru, license—" He rattled it off.

"I'll certainly keep my eyes open, officers," the man said, moving forward.

The two cops, both still dripping water from their slickers, went past me, leaving me staring at a young fellow with red hair and a smooth, youthful face. He was dressed in a shirt and tie and had a metal clip over his pocket that read S. O'CONNOR, ASST. MGR.

Howdy Doody: it was Howdy Doody.

You've got to realize what it was like for me, standing there drenched, water still dripping down my sleeves and off my back, as I realized several things at once:

Shannon was a guy, not a girl.

He was the same guy Mr. Horn-ton and I had seen kissing up to Marilyn French in the parking lot just a few days ago.

And worse, this guy had just lied to two Northport police officers.

"You want something, kid?" he said, his voice sharp, impatient. "Because I'm busy right now."

He stepped back into his office, and against all my better judgment I walked in behind him, leaving the door ajar behind me. I could feel my knees start to buckle and everything inside me fold up as I realized

...

He was leaning over a small gray

metal desk, opening and shutting drawers quickly, and for a moment didn't realize I was still there. Suddenly he stood up, looked at me and said, "Maybe you didn't hear me, kid, but I've got things to do. You want an application, you come back Monday morning; someone will give you one."

For a moment his eyes were right on me, cold dark eyes. There seemed to be nothing there, behind them or in them, and maybe I'd seen too many slasher movies or read too many horror comic books, but they were what writers called "empty eyes." Absolutely empty.

They were also eyes that glanced past me to a row of hooks mounted on the wall by the door. Keys.

"Did you hear me, kid?" he said as he came around the desk. "Come back Monday."

"Sure," I said, backing out, then tearing down the hall to the exit doors. The freezing rain outside was like a black sleet pelting the lot. I pushed open the doors and ran out into the lot, my slicker open; it felt like someone was throwing buckshot on me. There were no cops. No sign of a Northport cruiser. I turned around. At the back of the restaurant were two large dumpsters. If...

I hurried that way, knowing that if a small, gray car was parked behind them, it had to mean...

It did. Marilyn French's gray four-door Subaru was parked where two cops would never think to look, or have any reason to look. Damn.

If my knees had nearly buckled a few minutes before, at least they'd



supported me. Now I couldn't even feel them. Of course, I thought, I could be wrong, I'm hardly infallible, but everything fell into place at that moment.

For busy or not, Shannon O'Connor had found time to leave the restaurant early this morning, probably calling on one of the girls from out back to watch the counter while he ran out to do an errand.

And the errand had been this: to drive with Marilyn French to the rehab center, kill her, and take her car back to the restaurant. It wouldn't have taken him twenty minutes, if that.

How could I doubt it? For even as I stood in the driving rain, O'Connor came out the employees' door in back, tan slicker on, hood over his head, and hurried to the car hidden behind the dumpsters. To get rid of it. To drive it into a bog, a pond, off the pier at the canal. Wherever. Or maybe just ditch it on one of the many unmarked dirt roads this part of the Cape was riddled with. Weeks could go by before it was found, even months.

I rushed back to the front lot praying I'd see a couple of headlights belonging to a white cruiser with a wide blue stripe—the Northport police—sweep this way, just checking to make sure. But like I said, why would they? They were asking routine questions, seeing if anyone remembered Marilyn French's coming in, ordering three muffin meals. They'd no reason to think that this man—who was now starting her car—had anything to do with her murder.

So I did the only thing I could do:

I ran to the picnic area in front of the restaurant, held my breath, and, as the gray Subaru sped by, kicked one of the large plastic trash barrels there directly into its path.

Which got not only O'Connor's notice as he swerved to avoid it and ran into the metal fence encircling the lot, but also got the attention of the two police officers, who were still inside the restaurant, picking up coffee and sweetrolls to go.

“I’m done with stuff like this; I shouldn’t have done it.” It was a confessional there, me on one side of the table at the Northport police station, a quietly thoughtful Jake Valari on the other. I raised my eyes to him. I was wet again, like a drenched shaggy dog. Jake’s slicker was hanging on the rack by the door, water dripping off it and creating a huge puddle on the floor.

I mean, what had I been trying to prove—and to whom?

“So . . . they going to get me for assault, Jake?” I asked suddenly. “For pushing that barrel into the car? I never saw a guy so crazy, the way he came at me with that tire iron. Lost his mind, I think.”

Jake just nodded, apparently thinking the same thing I was thinking:

Good thing three truckers and two police officers had watched the whole thing in amazement from inside the restaurant. Shannon O'Connor probably could have driven by in the rain unnoticed, gray car and license plates and all. It had been my action that had emptied the restaurant . . .



"Not your fault, Herbie," Jake said, leaning over the table toward me, "that you inadvertently hit that barrel with your foot. Little accident is all. You stumbled in the rain, pushed a barrel over. Besides, it's not important, not in the light of . . . more important things."

I sighed, sat back. I'd already got a grilling from two Northport cops, a detective, and someone from the county D.A.'s office. The little slip of paper I'd carried in my pocket had been turned over to the detectives. The tire iron Shannon O'Connor had tried to hit me with had been confiscated, was going to the state lab for testing.

And Shannon O'Connor had been arrested, was now tucked away in the county jail.

But as he'd been taken away in the rain at the restaurant—where two police officers and three truckers had subdued him—it had been me O'Connor had screamed at:

"I'll get you, you little son of a—! Interfering kid! I swear I'll get out and I'll kill you!"

That hadn't been very smart of him, but since when had this guy shown he was very smart?

"I've only got one thing to ask you," Jake said, lifting his head and nodding to the Northport chief of police, who apparently had more questions for me. "Why didn't you show me that receipt you found? We're damned lucky things turned out the way they did. This O'Connor was a dangerous man, Herbie. He still is a dangerous man."

"I don't know, Jake, I . . ."

Then I saw Paul Fiore's sneering face before me again, saying, "This

time we're leaving it to the professionals. Your days of playing junior detective are over, Herbert Sawyer."

I shook my head, aware that the police chief was standing just behind me.

"I just thought this Shannon . . . that she was a girl, and she might talk to me easier than to . . ." I stopped short and sighed. I was trying not to think about what was going to happen when I got home—if I got home—later.

"Yeah, it's a funny thing this Shannon turned out to be a guy." Jake said fairly softly. The police chief came around to my right side, looked down at me somberly. "Because, Herbie, it just happens to be that Marilyn French, well, she was a guy, too."

Funny thing about the brain: it wants to make sense of things, but it also seeks a certain level of comfort. If an illusion is more comfortable than the truth, then the brain sometimes rejects the truth. This is why it's so hard to convince people that some well-ingrained myths just aren't true.

Such as the one that insists the full moon can make people act crazy even though no statistical evidence proves it. Study after study has refuted the belief that emergency rooms are busier during full moons than at other times. Here's another one: a lot of people want to believe the seasons are caused by the earth's distance from the sun. They believe the earth is closer to the sun in July and August; therefore we have summer. In December and January the earth is farther away





from the sun; therefore, it's winter. But that isn't the way things are at all. I remember a sixth grade teacher trying hard to explain that the seasons were really caused by the earth's axial tilt. Of course all the kids in the class were shaking their heads saying no, no that just doesn't make sense.

It doesn't make sense; it doesn't seem real; so we create our own reality within our own limited sphere of knowledge and experience. Sad thing is, it's not reality we're creating but an illusion.

As for those sixth graders, it was an illusion that started to crack the moment the teacher asked, "Then what about Australia? If you're right and I'm wrong, shouldn't Australia be having winter now, too?" (This little story happened in December.) But the kids all knew the Australians were having a warm and summery Christmas; we'd seen it on TV. So that one simple question turned a lot of them around.

Anyhow, it was happening again now. People locked into their illusions were trying to force their own version of the truth onto events, but when they couldn't, they found they were facing their own "Australia question."

The television set in our living room crackled as Paul turned up the volume, then changed the channel to local cable news:

"Speculation centers on a possible motive for the murder of Marilyn French, the transvestite found bludgeoned to death near the Northport County Rest and Rehabilitation Center early Saturday morn-

ing. According to friends of accused murderer Shannon O'Connor, O'Connor was a gentle but highly possessive man. New evidence from confidential sources indicates that Marilyn French—also known as Marvin French—was being pressured into having a sex change operation by O'Connor. Our sources say that when French changed her mind, O'Connor went crazy, lost his temper, and killed French in a rage. However, O'Connor's attorneys have released a statement in which they assert that there never was a 'gender issue' between O'Connor and French. According to this statement, O'Connor and French were 'merely close friends.' O'Connor insists that he struck French with a tire iron on October twenty-sixth in 'self-defense.'"

I watched the television uneasily. Where was illusion? Truth? And how would the law sort it all out?

"Sickos," Paul said as he adjusted the recliner. Shannon O'Connor was being dragged from court and escorted under heavy guard—officers in bulletproof vests—to the waiting prison wagon. In the crowd outside the Northport County Courthouse were groups of gay-rights activists, even though it had been pointed out in more than one venue that this had hardly been a case of gay bashing or murder due to sexual orientation. Despite that, security was heavy; one news station reported that O'Connor had received several death threats. His attorneys were planning a press conference in an effort to lay the groundwork for their self-defense theory, parts of which claimed that



it was Marilyn French who'd gone crazy, that French had tried to kill O'Connor when he announced he wanted to break up with her.

"Too bad we don't have the electric chair in this state," Paul went on. Then he gave me a grim look.

For two days I'd been able to avoid him. Now here I was, dumping my books in a kitchen chair.

My part in this whole situation had been so grossly underplayed that it was nearly deleted. "Evidence discovered" at the murder site, which was occasionally mentioned in the news, included the restaurant receipt. There was no mention of who had discovered it.

As for O'Connor's capture and arrest, that had been due to "the quick and determined intervention of several patrons of the fast-food restaurant where O'Connor was assistant manager."

No mention of me or my name had appeared anywhere, much to my mother's relief.

Now she was cooking something in the deep fat fryer: fish, fries; there were hot rolls on the counter already. Paul had recently expressed his disdain for "fast food," preferring "home-cooked meals" instead, so she was busily accommodating him, again.

"So, Herbie," Paul shouted as he flew through channels with lightning speed on the remote, "did you turn in that English paper? And what about that Spanish assignment and the geometry test? I hope you made an appointment to get some help in math."

"Who the hell—" I whispered to no one in particular, though my

mother heard and gave me a sharp look.

"He's just concerned. He cares about you," she said to me softly. "Please, Herbie, try to be civil."

So this was what it had come to: her and me too afraid of the jerk in the recliner to talk at a normal volume. I lost all appetite and picked up my books.

"I can't deal with this now," I told her with exasperation. I went into our small back hall looking for my jacket. I figured I'd take a walk to the library or go over to my friend Remmy's house, anywhere to get out of here.

But she was right behind me. "Where are you going?"

I turned around. She looked as pale as chalk and just about as durable, as if she'd break if someone dropped her.

"What the hell do you see in that guy?" I demanded. "You can't honestly say you're in love with him?"

"Herbie, Paul is—" She ran a hand over her face. "Paul's dependable. I know where I stand with him. I feel comfortable with him, like I used to feel with—"

I didn't want to hear the rest. I walked back into our kitchen.

Paul was standing right there, hands on his hips like he was already the master of our domain. "You know, Herbie, you and I need to talk. I don't like your involvement in this crap." A gesture of his head toward the television where a reporter was still going on about the "Transvestite Murder Case." "And I don't like the attitude you take with me, either."

For one flabbergasted moment I

looked at my mother, but she shook her head and moved past me to set the table.

"Out on the porch, Herbie," Paul said to me. "Now."

"It seems that this time you're not getting any credit, are you, boy?" Paul said snidely, local newspaper in his hand. "That's a shame, isn't it? You nearly get hit in the head with a tire iron by a madman, and the whole world never gets to learn about it. According to your mother we can thank the great Jake Valari for that. But you know, the way I look at things, it's Jake Valari we can blame for your getting involved in this kind of crap."

He opened the newspaper, looked down at it. "The paper says the muffin guy was upset when he found out his guy friend changed his mind about turning into a girlfriend. The whole thing's pretty sordid." Back to me. "I never want you mixed up in this sort of thing again."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I said.

"I'm going to ignore the way you talk to me, boy, so I can get some things off my chest," Paul continued. "Because apparently you have no idea what you put your mother through each time you get mixed up in one of these—escapades with Jake Valari. It's happened too many times."

"It's happened a few times," I argued back. "And I've never gone looking for it. It just happens."

"People being killed? Accidents, murders, whatever?" He was incredulous. "You're always there! Your mother says it's just coincidence,

but I think if that's so it's been a series of pretty sick coincidences and they're going to stop right here, right now." He walked toward the screen door, sighed, turned and looked at me. "I'm going to marry your mother, Herbie, and I'm moving her—and you—to Northport. I have a real nice townhouse close to my work and your new school. I know the principal of Northport High; we played ball together. Serious guy. Strict. Won't take any funny business from you."

"I have never caused a problem at school," I insisted.

"What are your grades like lately?" he demanded. "Papers you have to rewrite? F's on tests? I know more than you think I do. Talked to a few of your teachers already."

"You have no right—"

"Oh but I do." His arms folded across his chest, he stepped right up to me, a gesture that was just about as intimidating as any I'd ever received, including having Shannon O'Connor come bolting after me with a tire iron in his hand. "I'm going to be your stepfather, Herbert Sawyer, Jr., and that'll give me the right. I'm marrying your mother, and there's nothing you can do to stop that."

I glanced through the window of the front door. My mother was setting out the plates and glasses, her face empty and glum-looking. I looked back at him.

"And I'm willing to forgive and forget what you did to me Saturday at the rehab center," he said. "A lot of men wouldn't take that from their own sons, let alone someone else's."

"What I did?"

~~~~~

"You pushed me, Herbie. I'm warning you now never to do it again."

Illusion or reality? I looked at him; I looked in at my mother. A big guy, Paul Fiore. So was my dad. You could rightly say Paul was a powerful man in stature, looks, physique. Just like my dad.

Jake Valari, on the other hand, was good-sized, too, but built more like a lineman than a quarterback. Or a baseball team's star pitcher.

"You are such a stupid, egotistical bastard," I told him. "If she does marry you, it's not because she's in love with you; it's because you remind her of my father."

And one more time I played the fool, pushing past him, shoving him with my shoulder, and walked back into the living room.

But maybe I wasn't the fool at that, for suddenly I realized I could do just that—push past him—with impunity. Paul Fiore was not the man he wanted me to think he was; that man, or that part of him, was just another illusion. In truth, Paul was nothing more than a grown up bully and, once confronted, would always back down.

Grabbing my jacket, I went once more out into the rain.

So it had been an entire series of illusions.

The ex-boyfriend, Dan Banner, had been arguing with Frenchie in the parking lot because he loved and cared about her and for no other reason:

"I know it was you who told the cops I was fighting with Marilyn." The voice startled me as I went in-

to Mr. Hornton's room. Banner was there, sitting in a chair close by Elmer Hornton's side. I caught my breath; Mr. Hornton's eyes grabbed mine, and he motioned with his left hand for me to be quiet.

"And I don't feel any resentment toward you for it. I just need you to know, sir, that I loved that woman, even though she and me, we'd broken up. Marilyn was a decent and generous soul, and if what you saw between her and me looked like—like something else, it was only because I didn't want her to go through with it. That O'Connor, he was all wrong for her, and even though I can be hot-tempered—yes, I admit it—I never laid a hand on her. She was going to do it, you see, have the operation to make herself. . . ." He shook his head heavily, looked down into his lap. "But I was dead set against it, so was her brother."

"Then who—" I stepped into the room, startling the man. He spun around, face gray and frightened, relaxing only when he realized I was just a kid. "Who hit her, Mr. Banner, and gave her that split lip and the black eye? Was it O'Connor?"

The moment I said it I knew the truth, separating out yet another illusion from reality.

For it *had* been Shannon O'Connor who was responsible for roughing Frenchie up. Oh yes, Mr. Hornton and I had seen O'Connor in the lot kissing up to Frenchie, attempting to make up with her as abusive men often do after knocking a woman around.

And now it was no mystery why Banner had upset Frenchie so; he'd been on a double mission, trying to

convince her not to have a sex-change operation and trying to end her relationship with O'Connor. Mr. Hornton and me, we'd been so sure that what we'd seen out his windows was real, when all it had ever been was . . .

What we thought was real; what we were comfortable with.

As for the maintenance worker, Frenchie's brother, he was supposed to have been the recipient of one of those muffin meals that had been scattered across the lot for the crows to eat. Oh yes, I'd seen Vincent French grab Frenchie by the neck and shake her, just like any man would do . . . to a younger brother. He'd been happy for her when she'd told him she wasn't going through with the operation, not yet at any rate.

But then she'd walked into the restaurant where Shannon O'Connor worked and from him bought three breakfast meals, two for herself, one for her brother.

After which O'Connor had left—to drive to the rehab center with Frenchie and there to kill her and push her body down the slope and onto the rocks by the canal.

And why had he done that? Because she'd told him she'd changed her mind? That she wasn't going through with the operation? Perhaps for a man like O'Connor it had been enough to set him off.

"Just wanted you to know, sir, that even though she'd only known you a short time, she thought real highly of you," Dan Banner told Mr. Hornton, voice thickening up, shoulders shaking. "And I've heard, sir, that you're an artist, that you've got

a real talent, and I'd like—well, we'd like, her brother and me, to have a picture of Marilyn on her grave marker. But the stone cutter says he needs a photograph or drawing. Truth is, sir, only picture I can come up with is one of when she . . . when she was still . . ." He looked down into his lap.

So where was illusion now? And where was the strength in reality as Mr. Hornton nodded thoughtfully and motioned me to his closet.

"Fetch me my pencils, Herbie, and my sketchpad."

So I did, handing them over to a man with a useless but very steady right hand.

"Well, what the hell are you looking at?" he snapped at me. "Least you can do is be helpful. Open the case and get me out a good dark gray pencil and a black one, too."

So I did and at his further direction folded his quivering fingers around the gray pencil, then, putting the pad in his lap, carefully stepped back.

"Hand's a bit weak, Mr. Banner," Mr. Hornton said, gripping the pencil in a clawlike grip . . .

That scrolled a perfect line across the paper as he started to sketch Marilyn French's portrait.

'Course it would be going too far to say everything worked out okay. When does *that* ever happen? Truth, illusion, reality, sometimes they get so mixed up together it takes a painfully long time to straighten everything out.

And sometimes you want to believe a thing so hard you can think of nothing else. You reject reality

even when it's staring you straight in the face: hard, solid, irrefutable.

So went my thoughts as I watched Meggie walk very slowly down the road, deliberately scuffing her feet along the rough pavement. It was the next Saturday, Halloween night. There were already trick-or-treaters out; I could see some running back and forth across the road behind her. There were just a few year-round residents in this part of town.

Behind me, the sun was setting, and the glare off Meggie's face was bright enough for me to see . . .

No, to *know* that I was facing my own illusions here, in her, in this beautiful girl who stopped suddenly and looked at me, a space of about ten feet between us.

"Herbie." She shook her long blonde hair and tried to smile.

The bay was behind me, sprinkled with the gold light of an autumn sunset. The long rows of cottages stretching to my right along the seawall were like silent faces, their black, lightless windows unseeing, unblinking eyes. No year-round people here, no porches decked out with pumpkins, no post lights dressed up with cornstalks; there were just the empty houses and the seawall, the long slope of cold beach, and the water whispering over the rocks. We'd already talked on the phone, our voices stilted and distant, she insisting she needed to see me, that she had "important things" to tell me, things that couldn't be said over the phone.

And I knew exactly what they were as she stopped dead in the road; I hadn't moved a muscle, not said a word.

"I mean . . . it's not like you and me . . . were really serious, is it?" she asked, shaking her head lightly. She looked past me to a sunset she probably would never see, let alone appreciate, and said, "Down the road from St. Bertilla's there another school, a private boys' academy."

Her eyes were back on mine. "Saint Bertilla's . . . well, we're like their sister school, you know? And we have these dances and . . ." She traced a line in the dirt with the toe of her sneaker. "Well, I guess you know by now. I met someone else. Oh, he's nothing like you, Herbie! Not nearly as goodlooking as you or as smart as you, or as nice! But—" Another dead stop as she finally, thoroughly, looked at me. For a moment I saw a flicker in her eyes, a small sign of uncertainty. But there was no going back now, no more lies; that would have been just another illusion. "He makes me laugh, Herbie," she said. "He makes me feel good; and . . . and, well, I was hoping you and I, we could still be friends, couldn't we, Herbie? Couldn't we?"

I turned my shoulder on her; the sun was behind me, finally slipping into the sea. I shoved my hands deep into my pockets and looked back at her. "Sure, Meggie," I said. "We can still be friends."



# UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the July-August issue.*

"Think you can make it to JFK in this blizzard?" asked Captain Robins.

Lieutenant Scollay looked up from his desk. "Why? Are you sending me to sunny California—I hope?"

"No, Sam," replied his superior in the NYPD. "I just had a phone call from Security at the airport. They say five suspicious couples are hanging around the United Airlines terminal. The weather has created a backlog of flights, and the airport is jammed. With people nervous and griping and tempers flaring, anything could break loose at any time. JFK requested help in keeping an eye on the situation at United."

Sam Scollay finally managed to start a squad car and inched and weaved along the traffic-packed lanes of the city. Why me? he was wondering. Snow was still swirling down. He'd probably be stuck out there all night, maybe part of the next day.

Once he reached the United terminal it did not take long to spot the couples who were causing concern. The five men looked hardboiled and ruthless, their women hardbitten and truthless. They were huddled together. Without being conspicuous, Sam circulated close to the group.

Eavesdropping, he learned that the names of the men were Alfie, Bugsy, Chuck, Dick, and Eddie; the women were Alice, Betty, Clara, Doris, and Ellen. Although they seemed to hail from different cities, they also seemed well acquainted. To Sam that spelled Mafia.

Four couples were recommending places to stay, dine, and gamble in Hawaii to the fifth couple; Sam concluded that was the destination of the latter. He envied them the trip. The others were inquiring about the "action" in France, Germany, Ireland, and Japan, evidently their destinations. They had not checked their baggage yet, and Sam was able to read the names on the I.D. tags: Kibble, Lemoine, Malvasi, Nabors, and O'Toole.

Outside, snowplows were creating little mountains along the sides of the runways. No planes were being cleared for takeoff. Sam pushed his way through the throng of harried passengers to the chief of security at the terminal. "Any problems?" he asked.

"Nothing yet," the worried chief replied. "I've got men sweeping through the place regularly. One old guy is missing his wallet, and a

young woman lost her ticket—actually, I'd expected worse. I hope this storm lets up soon."

"So do I," agreed Sam, and wandered back to the suspicious couples.

(1) Betty, Clara, and Doris are the three blondes. They are married to Bugsy, Mr. Kibble, and the man going to Ireland. The other two women are brunettes.

(2) Dick, Clara's husband, and the man waiting to go to Hawaii have the last names of Kibble, Malvasi, and O'Toole.

(3) Doris, Mrs. Lemoine, and the woman going to Germany are married to Chuck (who is not Ellen's husband), Dick, and Eddie.

(4) At last the runways were cleared and planes were announced. The man and his brunette wife going to Japan were the first of the group to depart. They said goodbye to Eddie and his wife, Betty and her husband, the Malvasis, and the couple going to France.

(5) Another couple boarded their plane, leaving Dick and his wife, the O'Tooles, and the couple headed for Ireland.

(6) Then Mr. and Mrs. Nabors left on their flight. Only two of the blondes and their husbands were still in the airport.

Sam Scollay sighed. Only two couples to go. He searched the terminal; everything was as normal as the milling crowds permitted.

Flight 281 to Germany was announced, and the fourth couple boarded their plane, which soon taxied onto the runway.

Only that last couple to keep under surveillance; then Sam could head home. But where *was* that couple? Nowhere in sight! They'd simply vanished. At that moment a pale security guard rushed up and grabbed Sam's sleeve. "Oh God!" he gasped. "Both of 'em dead, one in each john. Bodies still warm, blood everywhere—"

"Hold it!" ordered Lieutenant Scollay brusquely. "*Who* is dead?"

"One of them couples you was watchin', sir."

"Quick, no time to lose! Notify the tower to hold flight 281 on the runway. I'll phone for SWAT backup. I know who were murdered and the likely suspects."

*What are the names of the murdered couple?  
And who are the likely suspects?*

See page 138 for the solution to the May puzzle.

FICTION

# ONE DEAD RUPTURED DUCK



Dan Sontup

*Illustration by David Fielding*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/00*

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**T**he man in the snap-brim brown fedora looked too young to be a homicide detective. "Gimme an I.D. here," he said to Mackenzie. "And don't try telling me you don't know him."

Mackenzie dropped his cigarette to the pavement, ground it out under his wingtip, and squatted down next to the body. A man flat on his back on 42nd Street on a Saturday night wasn't that unusual, especially just west of a raucous Times Square that only a few years earlier had been the scene of the biggest celebration of all when guys were whooping it up and using the end of the war as an excuse to kiss all the girls, among some other activities that weren't quite that wholesome, like picking pockets and rolling drunks in the alleys.

Mackenzie had been there, still in uniform, not really able to get fully into the mood because he kept seeing the shattered bodies of fallen comrades on a string of Pacific islands and wondering why he had been spared.

The body in front of him on the sidewalk this night wasn't shattered. If you didn't look closely, you might easily think it was just another passed-out drunk, often part of the scenery on this street. But this wasn't a drunk. This was unmistakably a corpse in a brown business suit, the jacket splayed out wide disclosing a white shirt and striped tie, with a huge red blotch in the middle of the white shirt.

The radio weather reports had been forecasting snow flurries for early this November evening, and the first few flakes were beginning to fall. Some of them touched the face and balding head of the dead man and clung to his full mustache. There was clearly not enough warmth left in the body to melt the snowflakes.

Mackenzie nodded. "Yeah, I know him. Name's James Russo."

The detective, who had introduced himself as Arnold Lindquist, squatted down next to him and tilted his fedora back on his head, releasing a tuft of curly blond hair that made him look even younger. "You're telling me nothing new," he said. "We already got his name from his wallet."

Mackenzie looked at him.

"What I want you to tell me and tell me right now," Detective Lindquist said, "is what's your connection with him."

"I interviewed him for a job yesterday," Mackenzie said.

"That why he had your business card on him?"

"Guess so. I gave him one after the interview."

"Real fancy, a private eye with engraved business cards," Lindquist said. "What will they think of next?"

Mackenzie shrugged. No point in trying for snappy repartee with cops, especially the young ones. The call had come from Lindquist a little before nine P.M., catching Mackenzie as he was getting ready to close up the agency office for the weekend. Lindquist had told him nothing over the phone except to get his tail down there to the crime scene right away, which took only a matter of minutes since the agency was just a

few doors away on 42nd Street. "Got any idea who knifed him?" Mackenzie said, staring down at the red stain on the white shirt.

Lindquist shot him a hard look. "Now what makes you ask that?"

"I've seen stab wounds before."

"And where would that be?"

"St. Louis homicide squad, before the war."

"I'm supposed to be impressed?"

Mackenzie shrugged.

"So, Mister Private Detective who used to be a homicide cop, enlighten me. What more can you tell me about this corpse you claim came to you for a job?"

"Well, you can see for yourself he's a vet, and—"

"Hold it, buster. I can see what?"

Mackenzie pointed to the dead man's lapel. "He was wearing the Ruptured Duck when he came to my office."

"The what?"

Mackenzie couldn't hold back a quick grin. The detective wasn't much more than a kid, after all. But he caught the grin, and it brought an angry flush to his face.

Mackenzie motioned again to the small stylized eagle inside a gold circle that formed the dead man's lapel pin. "GI's got them when they were discharged. Sort of a way of identifying themselves as veterans."

Lindquist grunted. "The war's been over for—what? Six, seven years now?"

"Just about."

"And this guy still wears that, uh . . ."

"Ruptured Duck. That's what ex-GI's called it."

Lindquist's eyes flicked to Mackenzie's open topcoat.

"Haven't worn mine since '46," Mackenzie told him.

"But this guy did."

"Guess it was important to him," Mackenzie said.

Lindquist got to his feet. Mackenzie joined him.

The wind kicked up suddenly, sending a swirl of snow and a loose front page of the *Journal-American* against Mackenzie's legs. He shoved the paper out of the way and watched the wind pick it up and send it scuttling down 42nd Street.

Lindquist took a crumpled business card from his side pocket. "Mackenzie Agency," he read. "This the card you gave him?"

"Yes, probably."

"Discreet Investigations,' it says here. Now, what's that supposed to mean?"

Mackenzie looked at the newspaper, still being pushed by the wind but now joined by other loose pages.

Lindquist abruptly jerked his thumb at the body on the sidewalk. "You hired him, you said?"

"I interviewed him. He wasn't hired yet."

"He wasn't a client?"

"No."

"Reason I ask," Lindquist said, "is you usually give business cards to someone who's doing business with you, right?"

"That's right."

"Someone who might hire you for one of your 'discreet investigations'?"

"Could be, yes."

"But you gave this guy your card and he wasn't a client, you say."

"That's right."

"You see what I'm getting at here?" Lindquist said. Mackenzie looked at him. "It just don't seem logical to me," Lindquist said, "giving a business card to someone you're going to employ."

"He asked me for it," Mackenzie said.

"He asked you for it? Well, now we're getting somewhere. Why'd he want your card?"

Mackenzie shrugged. "So he'd have the address and phone number, I guess."

"He didn't already know this?"

"He came in for the job cold."

"What's that mean exactly?"

"He said he was looking for some kind of security work and saw the agency name in the lobby directory and that we did investigations, so he came on up."

"Just walking around and looking in building lobbies for work, that it?"

"Some people find jobs that way," Mackenzie said.

"And you hired him just like that, right on the spot?"

"No. He filled out an application and gave me a letter of reference, and I told him he could maybe start part-time next week if everything checked out okay."

"I think you're lying," Lindquist said.

Mackenzie was careful not to shrug.

"I think this Russo guy came to you because he needed a private eye. What'd he have you doing for him that ended up with him getting knifed?"

"We weren't handling anything for him," Mackenzie said. "That's not the way it was."

Lindquist looked at him in a long, unblinking stare. "Bet if I check through the files in your office, I'd find out more about Mr. James Russo here and what the real tie-in with you is."

"Our files are confidential," Mackenzie said.

"Maybe. And maybe they're not, seeing as how this is a homicide we're dealing with here."

"My agency will cooperate with you all the way, Detective Lindquist—within the limits of our legal rights."



Lindquist gave him a shark's tooth smile.

Mackenzie waited patiently.

"Okay, hotshot," Lindquist said, the angry flush returning to his face. "Get outa here. I'm done with you—for now. But we'll be talking again real soon. You can make book on that. You understand me, Mister Private Eye?"

Mackenzie took it slow and casual, pausing to light a cigarette, then deliberately let the quick grin cross his face again. "My pleasure, sonny," he said and turned his back and walked away, feeling Lindquist's eyes boring into the back of his skull.

Less than a hundred yards from where the body of James Russo still lay on the sidewalk, Mackenzie entered the lobby of the Hotel Dixie and headed for the Plantation Lounge. The swelling Hammond organ filled the air with the sweet sound of "Danny Boy."

Mackenzie grunted. He was in luck. If that tune were being played, it meant Charlie Crocker was there. He found Charlie perched on a stool at his usual spot at the far end of the square-horseshoe bar, a half smile on his lips.

Mackenzie slid onto the empty stool next to him. Crocker acknowledged him with a brief nod, then turned back to the small stage at the open end of the horseshoe.

Mackenzie studied him while Crocker sat silently, listening to the final notes of the song. Even sitting down Crocker was a tall man, in his forties, a craggy face, wavy graying hair, thick bushy eyebrows, and a certain set to his mouth that told you that even though he might get all sentimental over an old folk song, it wouldn't be wise to fool with him.

"Buy you a drink, Mack?" Crocker asked in his gravelly voice.

Mackenzie shook his head. "We got some work tonight. Can you reach Walt? I'll need the two of you on this with me."

Crocker pursed his lips and glanced at his watch. "Young Walter should be getting ready for a late Saturday night date just about now."

"Get hold of him," Mackenzie said. "He'll have to cancel his date. I'll be in the office."

Crocker nodded.

"Fifteen minutes," Mackenzie said.

Crocker nodded again and reached for his drink.

In the quiet of his third floor office Mackenzie sat at his desk in the circle of light formed by the gooseneck lamp and stared into the dimness of the small room. He still had on his topcoat and hat. The building management didn't believe in keeping the heat going after hours.

He rubbed his hand across his chin, feeling the dark stubble that matched the black of his hair. He was a big man, taller than Crocker, but with a face that had yet to develop the cragginess of the older man,

although the light gray of his eyes, thoughtful now, could turn hard and piercing when needed.

He sat silently for a moment longer, then unlocked his desk and opened the bottom file drawer. He extracted James Russo's file and laid it in front of him on the desk.

There were only two sheets of paper in the file—Russo's application form and a white-on-black photostat of a letter of reference. Mackenzie studied the application first. Honorable discharge, MP, U.S. Army, 1946, followed by several years of moving around the country in a variety of jobs, most of them some form of security guard. References on request. Nothing remarkable there except that Russo's record didn't show much job stability. The man either had a wanderlust or else couldn't hold down a job.

Mackenzie thought back to the day before, a Friday afternoon, half-closing his eyes as he visualized Russo sitting across from his desk. Average height, bushy mustache, balding, sitting ramrod straight with his trenchcoat belted and buckled and holding on his knee a wide-brimmed hat that almost made it to being a Stetson. No cowboy boots, though—highly polished black shoes that gleamed in the light from the desk lamp. A picture-perfect display of a disciplined, in-control man of military bearing. The kind of a man who would take inordinate pride in wearing the Ruptured Duck pin long after it meant anything to others.

Mackenzie next scanned the photostat of the handwritten letter of reference. It was on a sheet of business stationery from a man named Robert Klavin, a former master sergeant in the same MP outfit in which Russo had served. The printed letterhead showed that Klavin's business, a spaghetti and meatballs joint, was just a few doors down on 42nd Street, with Klavin listed as "Owner & Manager." The letter was a character reference for Russo, a To-Whom-It-May-Concern piece, verifying only that they had served together and that Klavin had always found Russo to be honest and trustworthy. Mackenzie looked at Russo's employment application again. The last job listed had been two months ago out in Ohio. Nothing that could be easily checked locally.

Mackenzie made some notes on his desk memo pad, then put Russo's folder back in his desk drawer and locked it.

The sound of the office's outer door opening and closing was followed by the unmistakable gravelly tones of Charlie Crocker, who was the first to enter Mackenzie's office. He moved to one of the client chairs facing the desk and sat down. The other chair was quickly occupied by his much younger companion, big and hulking with a powerful slope to his shoulders. Both men wore topcoats. Crocker sported a jaunty Irish tweed cap, low over his eyes, some flakes of snow still clinging to the brim. Walt Havemeyer was hatless, his red hair sprinkled with melting frost that sparkled wetly like sequins.

Mackenzie nodded at both of them. "Sorry about your date, Walt."

Walt grinned. "She'll wait up for me."

"What's the deal, Mack?" Crocker asked.

Mackenzie gave them a quick rundown of the session with Detective Lindquist.

Walt said, "You were thinking of hiring this—what's his name?"

"Russo. James Russo."

Crocker grunted. "Business getting that good, boss?"

"We can use some part-time help, yes. But he wasn't really hired yet. I still hadn't checked him out."

"And now he's dead," Walt said.

Mackenzie nodded. "And that puts us on the spot. Right now, tonight."

Crocker's eyebrows rose. "How so?"

"Lindquist thinks Russo was a client and that he got knifed while we were working on a case for him. He made it clear he wants to check out our files and see for himself."

"He can't do that," Walt said sharply. "That's confidential stuff in there."

Crocker snorted. "He can if he's got a judge in his pocket somewhere who'll sign off on a search warrant."

"Exactly," Mackenzie said. "We can't take that chance. We've got to move first. We may have less than twenty-four hours to head him off."

"And how do we do that?" Walt asked.

"By pointing Lindquist's nose away from this agency."

Crocker looked thoughtful. Walt said, "You got a plan, boss?"

"Nothing fancy," Mackenzie said. "Just developing enough leads so that Lindquist will want to follow them and maybe forget about looking through our files. I can tell you right now he's looking for any excuse to toss this office. Maybe because he just doesn't like private eyes, or maybe because I showed him up about not knowing what a Ruptured Duck is. Whatever, we got to get him off our backs."

"Okay," Crocker said. "Where do we start?"

Mackenzie pushed a couple of memo slips to the center of the desk. "He was at this resident hotel," he said to Crocker. "I don't think Lindquist knows this yet because Russo just moved in the other day and probably hasn't put the new address in his wallet because he told me this hotel is only temporary. Get down there and see what you can find out."

Crocker picked up the memo slip. "I know this joint. Cheap and dirty."

"We don't have a picture of Russo," Mackenzie said, "so you'll have to make do with this description of him I've written down. And that goes for you too, Walt."

"I take it I don't get to play around in a dirty hotel room with Charlie, right?"

"Right. You're going to play around in the dirt right here on 42nd Street. You got lots of contacts here. Russo was found dead on this street. How did he get here? What was he doing here? That's what I want to know."

"Can do, boss."

"Find out all you can," Mackenzie said. "Both of you. I'm gonna follow up on the reference Russo gave. It's right down the street." He looked at his watch. "Let's meet in two hours."

"Back here?" Walt asked.

"No. It's better this office stays dark. I don't want Lindquist getting the idea he can walk in here and start questioning us and snooping around, even if he doesn't have a warrant yet."

"Makes sense," Crocker said. "Where'll we meet?"

"Marco Polo's."

Walt grinned. "Ah, best eggs and french fries in town. You buyin', boss?"

Crocker sighed and stood up. "C'mon, sonny, we got serious work to do."

After they left, Mackenzie picked up the third memo slip with Klavin's address on it and looked at it thoughtfully for several long moments, then turned off the gooseneck lamp and made his way out of the office in the darkness.

**T**he night clerk was young and pimply. "You a cop?" he asked. Crocker shook his head. "Private investigator." "Got any I.D.?" Crocker held out a five dollar bill.

The clerk's hand was a blur as he took the bill and pocketed it. "What can I do for you . . . Mr. Lincoln?"

"James Russo just moved in. What room number?"

"Register's put away for the night. Can't check that for you right now."

Crocker showed him another five but kept it out of the clerk's reach.

"I need to see Russo's room, and I need you to help me do that."

"It could be arranged."

Crocker let him take the second five. Both the clerk's hands moved fast this time. The money disappeared, and a room key appeared.

"Room 510."

The elevator was old and creaky and smelled like a subway toilet. Crocker took shallow breaths until he got off on the fifth floor. The smells were not much better here.

Room 510 was down at the end of a dim corridor, next to a flickering red EXIT sign. Crocker tapped on the door, waited for a few moments, then drew his .38 Special, used the key, and eased himself into the room. He stood in the darkness, letting his eyes adjust, not moving until he was certain he was alone in the room. He holstered the .38, found the light switch, and flicked it on.

The room was spare, just basic fleabag accommodations. Slipping on a pair of lightweight gloves, he began his search. Everything was as he expected until he pulled out the night table drawer and held it up high and looked at the bottom.

He grunted with satisfaction when he saw the brown envelope fas-

tened to the underside of the drawer with adhesive tape. He removed the envelope and opened it and drew out faded newspaper clippings and a folded sheet of white paper.

Crocker skimmed the contents quickly, then put everything back into the brown envelope and slipped it into his inside jacket pocket.

In the lobby Crocker went over to the desk. He held out a ten spot. The clerk started to reach for it. Crocker pulled it back. "You never saw me."

The clerk nodded vigorously.

"I'll come back if I find out different," Crocker said. The clerk swallowed hard. Crocker dropped the ten on the counter and walked out the lobby door without looking back.

**W**alt hit it lucky on his fifth try. The man was one of the Times Square derelicts, grime on his hands from searching trashcans, stubble showing through the crust on his face, huddled down into a torn overcoat, hatless, standing there in the falling snow and sniffing up at Walt.

"You telling me like it was," Walt said, "or just telling me what you think I want to hear?"

"The truth, so help me, mister."

"Okay, make it good."

The man started to talk, sniffing, wiping his hand across his nose, his lips barely moving over his rotting teeth. Walt listened intently, then silently handed the man the folded bill he had kept palmed.

After the man had scurried away, Walt stood quietly while the snow began to fall heavier. He looked up at the Camel billboard high above Times Square, watching thoughtfully as the man in the billboard blew a giant smoke ring from the round hole in the middle of his lips. Walt grinned and lit a cigarette, cupping his hand around the lighter, then puffed out a perfect smoke ring to match the one that had just issued from the billboard.

**M**ackenzie stopped at Klavin's storefront restaurant a few doors down from his building. Through the falling snow light gleamed from inside the steamy plate glass window, highlighting the arc of big gold lettering that announced that this was the home of Romeo's Spaghetti Parlor and, in smaller letters in the right-hand corner, listed spaghetti at fifty cents a plate, sixty cents with sauce, and seventy-five cents if topped off with two meatballs.

Just below the arc of gold lettering, in the center of the window, a decal of the head and shoulders of a chef flashed a wide smile at the street. He had a big black handlebar mustache, a red bandanna around his neck, rosy cheeks, gleaming white teeth, and a giant chef's hat perched at a cocky angle on his head. Obviously someone's idea of what an Italian chef named Romeo should look like.

The smiling-chef motif ran rampant inside as Mackenzie discovered after pushing open the door and entering the narrow room. A row of smiling rosy-cheeked chefs marched along the top of the walls just below a stained tin ceiling that had once been white. On the left wall five miniature chefs topped a full coat rack, each chef decorating the top of a brass hook. Four tables, each with a smiling-chef menu holder in the center, were placed along the wall under the coat rack. Two couples, a man and a woman and two old men, sat at tables at either end, busily eating and not talking.

Mackenzie turned and looked at the counter with five empty stools along the right wall. The big man behind the counter looking sourly at Mackenzie might have been a chef, but he didn't look anything like the ones in the decals. He was wearing a shortsleeved, stained, yellow shirt, an even more heavily stained white apron tied around his middle, no chef's hat on top of his head of bushy brown hair. He had a florid face, no mustache—handlebar or otherwise—and a bulbous nose over thin lips.

"What'll it be?" he asked.

Mackenzie resisted the urge to say, "You can't be Romeo," and instead said, "Looking for Robert Klavin."

"What for?"

"Some talk."

"About what?"

"James Russo."

The man stared at him, looked over at the two couples still eating busily and silently, and motioned with his head to the back of the restaurant. "We can talk in there."

He turned and walked behind the counter to a door at the far end. He opened the door and waited while Mackenzie went into the kitchen ahead of him. The steamy smell of boiling spaghetti overlaid with the pungent odor of tomato sauce and meatballs assaulted Mackenzie's face.

"You're Robert Klavin?" Mackenzie asked as the man went to the stove and adjusted the flame under a cauldron.

"Yeah. What's this about Russo?"

Mackenzie handed him a business card. Klavin studied it and handed it back. "Yeah, Russo told me he'd been to see you about a job."

"When did he tell you that?"

"Couple of hours ago."

"He was in here then?"

"Yeah."

"Was it about the letter of reference you gave him earlier?"

"What's it to you? You checking the reference in person?"

"Russo is dead."

Klavin looked steadily at Mackenzie, rubbed one beefy hand over his eyes, then went to a back door and opened it. Snow swirled in the alley



outside. Klavin hawked and spat out into the snow, closed the door, and faced Mackenzie.

"What happened to him?"

"Murdered," Mackenzie told him. "He had my card on him. The detective on the case called me for an I.D. and to ask how I knew Russo. I'd like to ask you the same thing."

"Why? What's it to you?"

"I'm involved," Mackenzie said. "I don't want to be, but I've been pulled into this. I'm trying to find some answers to get the cops off my back."

Klavin went to the wall opposite the stove. A black overcoat hung on a hook in a small alcove between shelves of restaurant-size cans. He reached into the pocket of the overcoat, took out a pack of cigarettes and a book of matches, lit up a cigarette, and inhaled deeply. He coughed, spewing out a mouthful of smoke, then turned to Mackenzie.

"Russo and me were in the service together."

Mackenzie nodded.

"An MP outfit here in the States. I was company topkick."

Mackenzie nodded again.

Klavin shrugged. "That's about it."

Mackenzie said, "You were buddies with this guy in the service and—"

"We weren't buddies. I told you I was the topkick. I didn't exactly fraternize with the privates in my company, least of all not with him."

"Something wrong with him?"

Klavin stared at him, shrugged. "Russo was just too gung-ho, even for an MP outfit."

"And you didn't like that?"

"You in the service yourself?"

"Yes."

"Company clerk?" Klavin's thin upper lip curled just a bit.

"Platoon leader."

Klavin grunted. "I got no more I can tell you about Russo."

Mackenzie took his time about lighting up a cigarette and blew out smoke to join that from Klavin. "You sure about that?"

"I got lots of work to do. You won't find any answers here, pal."

"Just one more. If you didn't like Russo, why give him a letter of reference?"

"He asked for it nicely."

Mackenzie took another drag on his cigarette. Klavin stared at him.

"Okay," Mackenzie said. "I'll leave you to all this work you have to do. I'll check back with you again—when you're not so busy."

Klavin went to the side door and tossed his cigarette butt out into the snow. He closed the door and turned and looked steadily at Mackenzie.

Mackenzie waited a moment, then nodded slowly. He walked to the door leading to the dining area and stepped through it, Klavin right behind him.

The two couples were still eating. The room was silent, except for a slurping noise one of the men made as he inhaled a forkful of spaghetti.

"Keep smiling, chef," Mackenzie said, and went out the front door.

Mackenzie watched Walt wolfing down his scrambled eggs and shoe-string french fries in their booth at the back of Marco Polo's. Crocker had ordered a buttered bagel and coffee, and Mackenzie only black coffee, which he sipped now as he scanned the contents of the brown envelope Crocker had given him.

"You read all this?" he said to Crocker.

"Skimmed it at the hotel, then read it all in the taxi on the way up here."

Walt swallowed a mouthful of eggs, washed it down with a gulp of coffee. "Can I see it?"

Mackenzie handed him the newspaper clippings but kept the sheet of paper. He read from it: "Hey, Jimmy, guess who I saw the other day up here? Good old Sarge. Bet you'll never guess what he's doing now—dishing out spaghetti and meatballs in a greasy spoon down on 42nd Street. A real comedown for him, I can tell you that. I went in to say hello to him, and he treated me like dirt, nothing much changed there, right? I was thinking of ordering the special plate and then leaving him a nickel tip, just to show him, but one look at him and I didn't have much appetite, know what I mean? Listen, if you ever get up this way, give me a call. It's been a long time."

Mackenzie studied the letter. "This guy Herbie, who wrote the letter, I gather he was trying to keep in touch with buddies from the old outfit."

Crocker nodded. "Could be the letter's why Russo left his job in Ohio and came up here."

Walt handed the newspaper clippings back to Mackenzie. "And the reason he came here is right there in those newspaper clippings."

"That's what I figured, too," Mackenzie said.

"Death of a prisoner in the stockade, MP's just beat out a court-martial," Walt said.

"Right," Crocker said.

"Russo and Master Sergeant Klavin cleared but reprimanded."

"Right," Crocker said again.

"So what've we got here?" Mackenzie said.

"Blackmail," Walt said.

"Revenge," Crocker said.

Mackenzie nodded. "Maybe both, huh?"

"So who's out to get who?" Walt said. "Who's doing the blackmail?"

"My money's on Russo," Mackenzie said.

Crocker grunted. "Makes sense to me."

Walt paused with his fork almost to his mouth. "What could Russo get out of Klavin by blackmailing him? That joint of Klavin's can't be bringing in much loot."

Crocker took a sip of his coffee. "Bleed him dry little by little maybe." "Starting with making Klavin help get him a job," Mackenzie said. He frowned. "Maybe I had it backwards, what I told Lindquist about how Russo came to the agency for a job. He told me he saw the name and what we did in the lobby directory and came up cold to ask for work. Maybe it was the other way around. He tells Klavin he needs money and a job. Klavin works in the neighborhood, so he knows about the agency. He gives Russo a letter of reference and tells him to try our agency."

"And Russo lets Klavin know this isn't the end of it," Crocker said. "Klavin's gonna have to kick in with extra money from the till on a regular basis, or else . . ."

"Or else Russo will tell what he held back when they were being investigated for the stockade death," Mackenzie said.

"Something that incriminates Klavin," Walt said.

Mackenzie nodded. "And then what? How do we get from there to Russo on his back on the sidewalk?"

"They fight when Russo goes back to tell Klavin he's probably got the job with our agency," Walt said. "Klavin grabs a kitchen knife and sticks it in our boy Russo."

"And . . .?"

Walt said, "The bum I talked to on 42nd Street said he saw Russo stagger out of an alleyway somewhere past the Hotel Dixie."

"It all ties together," Crocker said.

Walt munched on a french fry. "That should get Detective Lindquist off our backs and away from the agency files, right boss?"

Mackenzie scratched the stubble on his chin. "Maybe."

"You want more?"

McKenzie frowned, then closed his eyes. He opened them again after a moment and said, "The smiling chefs!"

"Huh?" Walt gave him a puzzled look.

"And the Ruptured Duck, too," Mackenzie said. "If I've guessed right, we can wrap it up right now for Lindquist." He shook his head. "I should've seen it right away."

"Seen what, boss?"

Mackenzie signaled for the check. "Eat up, Walt—but leave some room for spaghetti and meatballs."

**T**he snow was coming down heavier as they approached Klavin's restaurant.

"Looks almost empty in there," Walt said. "Just one couple at a table."

"Good," Mackenzie said. "You take the alley, Walt. Wait outside in case he makes a break for it." He turned to Crocker. "You go in and sit at the counter and order. I'll come in a little later. Just follow my lead."

Crocker grunted and headed for the front door. Walt slipped into the alley. Mackenzie waited in the falling snow, his coat collar turned up, the snow forming a ridge on the brim of his hat.

He gave it a full five minutes and then entered the restaurant. The steamy spaghetti smell hit him again. A man and a woman sat at one of the tables, their coats above them being guarded by the smiling chefs on the hangers. Crocker sat at the counter, his fork poised over his plate. He didn't turn around. Klavin glared at Mackenzie from behind the counter.

Mackenzie motioned with his head to the back of the restaurant and started for the door leading to the kitchen. He heard Klavin behind him.

In the kitchen, they faced each other. "What the hell you want now?" Klavin said.

"What'd you do with the knife, Klavin? You try washing it off after you used it on Russo when he came back here? You know, that doesn't always get rid of all the blood."

Klavin moved toward him. "Get outa my place. Get out now!"

Mackenzie patted his pockets. "How about we talk this over while I light up?" He shook his head, "Whaddaya know, I'm outa smokes again." He snapped his fingers, turned before Klavin could stop him, and went to the alcove between the shelves of large cans. "Lemme bum one from you," he said and reached up quickly and pulled Klavin's black overcoat off the hook.

Klavin gave a loud shout and headed for him. Mackenzie braced himself. The restaurant door flew open. Crocker charged in, his .38 in his fist. Klavin stopped, spun around, and ran to the back door. He flung it open. Outside, in the falling snow, Walt stood like a redhaired giant with sparkling snow in his hair.

Klavin turned back and stared at Crocker's gun and then at Mackenzie, who stood there holding the trenchcoat and wide-brimmed hat that had been hidden under Klavin's overcoat in the alcove.

The kitchen lights gleamed off the golden Ruptured Duck in the lapel of the trenchcoat. "I guessed right," Mackenzie said. "Didn't have time to get rid of them yet, did you?"

Afterward, when Lindquist had been called and had come with a couple of uniforms and had taken Klavin away and locked up the restaurant, the three of them stood outside on 42nd Street. The snow had stopped, but the street was still noisy with traffic and horns blowing.

"Four customers in the restaurant when I came in before," Mackenzie said. "Four coats on a five-hook rack on the wall, but all five of them were full. There was an extra coat there. Klavin's coat was in the alcove in the kitchen. I should have put it all together then. The fifth coat on the rack was a trenchcoat. I saw it, but it didn't register. So much for being a hotshot private eye."

"You can't blame yourself, boss," Walt said. "You weren't looking for a trenchcoat then."

"Maybe. But I should've also remembered that Russo had the Ruptured Duck on his coat lapel, too. He sat there in the office while I interviewed him, all belted and buckled up, but when I checked the body to I.D. him for Lindquist out there on the sidewalk, he was hatless, and his suit jacket was wide open. No coat in this weather, no hat, but still another Ruptured Duck in his lapel. I should've seen it then, but I was concentrating too much on Lindquist to think it all through."

"Like Walt said," Crocker's gravelly voice rumbled, "don't blame yourself. Russo was already dead when you went to see Klavin."

"I should've seen it," Mackenzie said.

Walt looked at his watch.

"She still waiting, you think?" Crocker said.

Walt grinned widely. "My women always wait up for me."

"See you Monday," Mackenzie said. "Thanks for the help."

Walt gave him a thumbs-up and turned and hurried along 42nd Street.

Mackenzie looked back along 42nd Street to where Russo had lain spread out on the sidewalk in the falling snow.

Crocker said, "Dixie's still open, Mack. Buy you that drink now?"

Mackenzie nodded. "Yeah. I got some things that need drowning."

FICTION

# SNAKEBIT

Dan A. Sproul





**I**t started out a gloomy Monday morning. On Sunday the Dolphins got hammered by the Broncos, and with two guys jabbering Chinese in front of me, I lost two hundred at Calder betting against the early speed. It was a hint of things to come.

Monday in the early a.m. I got a call from Donk Nolan, the bail bondsman. Tiny Baldwin had missed a Friday court appearance.

"You got two days to get him back or that miserable blöb of fat is gonna cost me fifty thousand," Donk imparted to me. "You got him the last time, I know you can do it again, Joey. I'm countin' on you."

"It'll cost you two thousand," I said. "Or you can get somebody else. And don't call me Joey."

"You freakin' miserable thief..."

"Be polite or I'll hang up."

Donk had little choice. The last time Tiny skipped out, Donk sent two other guys after him unsuccessfully before he finally—reluctantly—called me. Tiny Baldwin was five foot seven inches tall and weighed about four hundred eighty pounds. To say he was a handful would have been an understatement of criminal magnitude. It wasn't that he was a fighter. He was just difficult to move if he chose not to go. His technique was to plop down in the middle of the floor and giggle uncontrollably at puny efforts to roll him out the door.

I hung up the phone and pondered how I might marshal the resources of Standard Investigations to find Tiny and wrestle him to justice. The single major resource of Standard Investigations is me—

Joe Standard—not counting my thirty-three-year-old Mustang convertible, which according to my mechanic needs every part replaced except the left wiper blade.

The city of Miami harbors multitudinous dusky lodgings into which Tiny might have waddled. There would be a few things to do before going after him. The trip to Luther's Feed Store in Dania where I could borrow a cattle prod would be the easy part. First I would have to find Tiny. To find Tiny I would have to enlist the aid of Swine.

Swine was Francis Swinehart or sometimes Captain Goofy as he was frequently hailed by his fellow workers at Calder Racecourse Security where he worked. His own preference, however, was Frankie or just plain Swine—anything but Francis. Swine was cursed with a thyroid in overdrive that caused his eyes to bug out now and again. This condition was aided and abetted over the years by the constant lambasting of his eardrums with acid rock, transmitted to his numbed brain from a pocket radio via earphones that for years clung to his bony head like an earmuff leech.

Swine only made it through the sixth grade. Brilliance was never a noticeable component of his personality. But he was loyal. He showed up for work on time, and he was a friend. Most important, Swine had struggled through the sixth grade with Tiny Baldwin's brother Wad. It was never clear why he was called Wad. It was either because he was extremely frugal or because he chronically displayed a rubber-banded lump of cash in his right

front trouser pocket. His given name was Morton. This I knew because he was fond of jumping bail also.

Swine and Wad had stayed close—make that acquainted—over the years. Both were devoted horseplayers and disposed to enjoying each other's company, hanging on the rail at the finish line on any given afternoon. I knew if I could find Tiny's brother Wad I could find Tiny.

Tiny was virtually helpless without Wad to run his errands and look after his needs. Carrying around all that weight severely limited his mobility. It did not, however, diminish his mental acuity. Tiny in his younger, slimmer days had been a master locksmith. He was still the best safe man in Dade County. Thing was, he was getting too fat to do the work. He was the brains, but when it came to the peeling, the drilling, or the blowing, Wad got the nod, so to speak.

I'd give odds that the reason Tiny got caught on their last caper and Wad didn't was that Tiny got stuck in a doorway or he couldn't get up the stairs fast enough to make the getaway. All I had to do was find a way to make Swine rat out his buddy Wad and tell me where he was holed up. If I find Wad, I find Tiny.

The Tropical at Calder meet was running, but Swine was working the night shift. He would likely be at the track anyway, watching the workouts. I'd just decided to take a ride over to Calder when the office door popped open. It was Swine. He appeared wildly agitated.

"Look at this!" he said, thrusting before my face a scrap of brown stained paper.

"Very nice," I replied. "What is it?" "Just read it . . . go ahead." He offered it up to me eagerly.

It appeared to be an entry form from Kentucky Best Bourbon. Swine nodded his head in expectation as I read the label. "WIN A TRIP TO THE DERBY! PLEASE STATE IN ONE HUNDRED WORDS OR LESS WHY YOU SHOULD BE THE WINNER OF AN ALL-EXPENSE-PAID TRIP FOR TWO TO THE KENTUCKY DERBY AND FIVE HUNDRED IN CASH TO BET ON THE WINNER. SEND THIS ENTRY ALONG WITH A LABEL . . ." I looked up. "So what are you peenin' your pants about?"

"I want to win the trip," he stated in his blissful ignorance.

"So do two hundred thousand other people."

"Yeah, I know. But you write all them reports for clients and everything—I thought maybe you could help me with my entry."

"I don't think I'd be very good at that sort of thing. Anyway, it's your entry . . . you have to write it."

He nodded. "Okay, how about some advice—like what should I say?"

"Jeez, I don't know. But if it means that much to you, let me think about it."

The thought occurred to me that this was a golden opportunity to weasel out of him the whereabouts of Wad. I would have to be crafty about it. Swine, after spending his entire adult life on the street, could be uncommonly perceptive in such matters.

He eased himself onto my office cot, which rested under my framed gigantic photograph of Seattle Slew

leading the field in his victorious romp in the 1977 Preakness Stakes.

He pulled a wadded-up piece of paper from his hip pocket. "How about this," he said, unfolding it. "*I think I should be the one to go to the Derby because I never been to the Derby and its not fair because I bet the races practically everyday and I ain't won that often. And I drink a lot of your bourbon.*" He looked up hopefully. "What do ya think?"

"It stinks," I told him.

"That don't help much."

"Okay, you're right. It *really* stinks."

"You think so?"

"Why should anybody give a damn if you've never been to a Kentucky Derby? Lots of people never been to a Derby, and lots of people don't win often at the track. You got to find a way to make yourself an object of pity—even more than you already are if that's possible."

"Huh?"

"Make something up," I said. "Tell them you always promised to take your grandpa to the Derby. You never got the chance because he drank himself to death drinkin' their bourbon. You got his ashes in an urn. You want to scatter them over the track."

"Hey, that's good. Can you write it for me?"

"I'm kidding. But I might be willing to write something for you . . . that is . . . if, ah . . . if you do something for me."

"Yeahhh . . ." he said, dragging the word out slowly, suspiciously.

"I need to find Wad Baldwin."

Swine shook his head. "Oh no, I can't do that," he said. "I know what

you're doin'. Wad's jumped bail again, ain't he?"

"No, he hasn't. It's not what you think." Swine got up to leave. "It's his mother," I added quickly. "She came to me looking for him."

"His mother?"

"Yes. She, ah . . . she wants him to come home for Thanksgiving dinner, but she don't know where to find him. She called me just a little bit ago."

"His *mother* called you?"

I nodded vigorously. "Yeah,"

"Liar, liar, pants on fire. His mama died eight years ago. Don't you remember? She got them bad oysters."

"Damn . . . the oysters . . . I forgot. It must have been his mother-law."

"Wad ain't never been married," Swine enlightened me smugly. "Want to try some more?"

The conversation was going nowhere. "All right, you don't have to tell me exactly where he is. But if you want me to write your entry for the Derby contest, you got to give me a hint."

"What kinda hint?"

I decided to come clean. "Just tell me where to find his brother Tiny. He's the one that's jumped bail."

"I'd tell you if I knew. But I don't know where he is," Swine confessed.

"I can't help you then," I said, watching him from the corner of my eye as he peered at his entry form, agonizing over his decision.

"There's *one* thing I could tell you," he mumbled, evidently deciding that he could not be held to the same degree of loyalty to Wad's brother as to Wad himself—not with a trip to the Derby at stake.

"What's that?"

"Tiny ain't got no pants," said Swine. "Wad sez he split out his last pair sittin' on a footstool, tryin' to bend over and get his socks off."

"Split out his pants?"

Swine nodded. "Yeah, he split 'em out. Wad said he has to go get him some new pants—before noon today—so's we can make the one o'clock post."

"What good does that do me?"

"They have to make Tiny's pants special," Swine explained. "You could hold a Cub Scout meeting inside his pants. He gets 'em from that Big Boy shop on Seventy-Ninth Street in Hialeah."

I made a tentative promise to Swine that if everything worked out I'd write up an entry for him.

I don't know why I ever suspected that this would be an easy undertaking after the calamitous weekend. Luck don't work that way. When it's bad, it stays bad. I'd have to hurry to be at the Big Boy shop before it opened. It was closing in on nine A.M. As I slipped the key into the car door, I heard a noise under the hood. A noise under the hood is not uncommon with my Mustang. It was unusual on this occasion since the engine wasn't running.

So I popped the hood.

The animal gave off a sound that was part growl, part scream, ending in a hiss. His eyes were shot with blood. Needlelike teeth were bared in his foam-flecked, saliva-drenched mouth. His frantic, wild eyes fastened on me. He hissed, then tensed. As he crouched for the spring at

my throat I slammed the hood down and jumped back. What a peachy way to start the day. I had acquired a rabid raccoon.

I got in and cranked the engine over. Slowly I inched the Mustang down the block two hundred yards to the corner liquor store. The growling, hissing, and screeching from under the hood was more pronounced than usual.

I got out at Omar's Liquor Store. As soon as I stopped, the snarling and screeching stopped also. The corner was a haven for winos, derelicts, and standard bums. There were eight or nine depressed souls slouched against the building or mingling.

"Hey, boss. Can I borrow a quarter?" said the first old man who approached with his hand out.

"Tell you what," I said. "I got an animal under my hood. I'll give you five bucks to get it out of there."

"Yes, sir, boss . . . five bucks. I be da man for five bucks. I be gettin' 'im out quick for five bucks."

I told him to get ready. I unfastened the hood and flung it open.

The raccoon snapped viciously, launching saliva and foam indiscriminately in several directions.

The old black man jumped back and almost fell. "Whoa! Dis is a six buck job."

He got a mop from Omar's and commenced to poke it at the raccoon. The other assembled panhandlers stood at a safe distance rubbernecking the procedure. "Turn the handle the other way," advised one of the onlookers. "You gotta get closer," said another. "Get 'im in da corner. Smack 'im wid it."

"You shut up! Dis be *my* six buck job."

Suddenly the creature decided he'd had enough of the old wino and took off in the direction of Omar's open doorway. The assembled bums dispersed rapidly, some stumbling and falling as the raccoon cut a furrow among them on his way into Omar's store. I gave the old bum a ten spot and took off.

The raccoon made me late to the Big Boy store. I waited around for an hour before talking to the store manager. I learned that Wad had picked up Tiny's pants and left while I was fooling with the raccoon.

The rotten luck I'd had over the weekend seemed to be on a roll. I mean, a *rabid raccoon* under my hood—give me a break. Something definitely seemed to be at work here.

It's not that I'm superstitious, but bad luck is real. Ask any horseplayer—any gambler. Once it's stuck on you, it's hard to shed, like bubble gum in your hair. Trust me, there are circumstances that can put the screws to your luck. For instance, when I'm at the track, I try not to let anybody who speaks Chinese anywhere around me, within earshot—very bad vibes. Forty-one consecutive losers once. And if you get near a two dollar bill, you can count on a very bad run. If you happen to *touch* a two dollar bill, you might just as well set fire to your money and be done with it. Of course, it's different things for different people. For me it's Chinese jabberin' and two dollar bills. The unfortunate string of bad circumstances currently plaguing me had to be bad juju from the Chinese

guys on Sunday. I got up and moved soon after the two sat down, but the damage was already done.

As I said, I'm not superstitious, but just to play it safe I stopped by a grocery store and bought a package of garlic cloves. I stuffed the raw garlic into my shirt pocket. Sometimes the wafting aroma of garlic can mitigate the winds of ill fortune—but not always . . .

The only avenue left was a trip to Calder to pick up Swine and Wad at the track, maybe follow Wad when he left for home—wherever home was. Finding someone at a major racetrack like Calder would normally be difficult. But most horseplayers are creatures of habit. I have my own lucky spot in the second level clubhouse. Swine and Wad habitually were to be found in the first level grandstand as near the finish line as possible.

But they weren't there. While I was making a sweep of the grandstand with my binoculars, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Hey, Joe. Been lookin' for you."

It was Swine. Wad was with him.

"Wad wants to talk to you, Joe," said Swine. Then quickly added, "I didn't tell him you was lookin' for Tiny—not until he said he was goin' to go see you."

Wad was slender with a narrow face. Hard to believe he and Tiny were related.

"Tiny's in trouble," Wad began, barely speaking above a whisper. "He's been kind of kidnapped."

"What does that mean, *kind of* kidnapped?" I asked him.

Wad explained that an ex-cellmate of Tiny's from Raiford by the

name of Switchblade Jacobs was holding Tiny at knifepoint. Switchblade had busted out of the Dade County lockup and was on the run. Tiny and Wad had given him eight hundred in cash, but he demanded a passport, too, so he could get out of the country. Wad went on to explain that Tiny was not feeling well and would allow me to take him in without a fuss if I could get him shed of Switchblade.

"This guy is really dangerous," Wad said in his whispering way. "But he's dumber than a box of rocks. He thinks the Virgin Islands are full of virgins. He wanted to go to St. Croix until he found out it was still U.S. territory. Now he wants to go to Bolivia."

"What do you want from me?"

"We need to get him on a plane the hell outa here," Wad said, raising his voice to near normal. "But where do we get a passport?"

"Earl Anybody," I responded.

"Huh?"

"Earl Anybody, the green card machine," I reiterated. "He's got passports, drivers' licenses, Social Security cards, voter registration cards—you name it. But it takes money. How much you got?"

Wad shook his head dejectedly. "Switchblade cleaned us out. I only got sixty bucks."

Here, I could see, was a chance to make a quick two thousand—if I could haul Tiny in without resistance. I offered up my forty-eight dollars. Swine contributed his thirty dollars.

"That's a hundred thirty-eight bucks," Wad announced. "Is that enough?"

"I think the going rate starts at about five hundred," I told him.

"What do we do?" asked Swine.

I looked at Wad. "So what do you like in the first race?"

We saved eighteen dollars out and dumped the rest on a three-to-one shot out of a son of the mighty Buckpasser by the name of Lucky Bucky. He had all the speed in the race and was dropping in class. It looked like a walkover.

Lucky Bucky broke on top, sprinted clear, and was out front by four at the top of the stretch. Then at the sixteenth pole he tried to hop over a blowing candy wrapper, causing . . .

"Did you see that?" shouted Swine. "The crooked, yellow little bastard jumped off the horse—did you see that?"

There was no doubt in my mind now. I was suffering a prolonged, entrenched, diabolical, near terminal case of snakebite. Unlucky Lucky Bucky went across the wire first, sans jockey, and our passport money went in the crapper.

From the track we all piled into my Mustang. Earl worked out of a van in South Miami near the old Tropical Park. Me and Earl had done business before. Once through Earl I obtained some fake Harvard diplomas for a couple of clients, but that's another story. People called him Earl Anybody because he rarely kept the same last name from week to week. Earl was an Israeli. For a short interval several years back he took to calling himself Oscar Meyer, like the weenie. But generally he was Earl somebody or other.

On a scale of ugly from one to ten



—ten being gargoyle category—Earl was about a twelve and a half. His teeth were bucked, his face was all bone and wart, and his ears reminded one of a '47 Plymouth coming down the road with the front doors open.

I explained to Earl our specific needs. "Sure," he said. "What you want, U.S. or Canadian?"

"Which is the cheapest?" Wad inquired.

"Six hundred for Canadian—seven hundred for a female Canadian. "Nine hundred for Americans."

I attempted to explain to Earl that we had a bad case of the shorts. "If you could trust me until—"

"No credit," said Earl. "That's our policy."

"What do you mean *our* policy?" asked Swine. "You got a tapeworm?"

"There's a bank right around the corner," Earl was quick to enlighten us. "Give them your story."

As he turned away, I pleaded, "Wait a minute, Earl. We got eighteen bucks. What can we get for that?"

It took several seconds for Earl to clear the tears of laughter from his slightly crossed eyes.

"Eighteen bucks, that's a good one," he said again as he started away. He took several steps before he stopped and turned back to us. "Wait a minute. Maybe I do have something for you."

He went into his van, came out with a small plastic-wrapped package, and handed it to me. I unwrapped the plastic carefully.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's an expired Italian passport," Earl explained. "But see here, all

you have to do is take a blue pencil and make that seven a nine. Nobody will ever know the difference." He opened the cover and pointed to a spot on the first page. "You need to get a photo and stick it on there."

The passport was written in Italian, and the name on the passport was . . .

"Ned Mussolini," I said aloud. "What kind of name is Ned Mussolini?"

"It's Italian," said Earl, jamming our eighteen dollars deep into his pocket.

It was a quiet, apprehensive ride to Tiny's hideout, a small, ramshackle house in West Hialeah.

"I'll go in with you, Wad," Swine volunteered.

"We'll all go in," I said, adhering to the strength in numbers theory.

Tiny was sprawled, and I mean sprawled, on a huge mattress in the middle of the floor. Standing nervously above him with a wicked looking switchblade at the ready was the infamous Switchblade Jacobs. His voice was high-pitched, still a man's voice but in dangerous territory.

"Bout time," he squeaked. "Gettin' hungry; this fat slob ate up everything in the house."

Switchblade was on the conservative side of a hundred fifty pounds with unkempt hair, a stubble beard, and mean eyes.

"Who's these bums?" he said to Wad as we filed in. He fell to his knees and put the knife to Tiny's throat. Tiny seemed out of it. "If they're cops, he's dead."

"Not cops," Wad answered quickly. "I had to call in a couple friends

to help get the passport. What's the matter with Tiny?"

"What am I, a freakin' doctor? He's been like that for an hour or two. Where's my passport?"

Wad handed the passport to him and bent down to Tiny, who was breathing shallow and quick. He was covered with sweat.

"We got to get him to a doctor," Wad announced. "I think he's having a heart attack."

"Anybody got an aspirin?" Swine asked, getting no response.

Wad took hold of Tiny's shoulders. "Get his feet, Swine," Wad ordered.

Swine rushed to comply and grabbed the feet. They drug Tiny on the mattress about three feet, grunting and straining. I got on Swine's end and took a leg.

"Hold it!" Switchblade screeched. "I'm goin' to the airport before he goes to the hospital."

With the top down somehow the four of us got Tiny into the back seat. We sat him upright; even so there was barely room back there for Wad. Most of Wad ended up on Tiny's lap. Switchblade and the knife rode up front with me. Just as I was about to crank the engine up, Switchblade took his first close look at the passport.

"This passport ain't 'Merican," he observed. "Ned Maz-za-rati," he muttered, trying to sound out his new name. As is the case with so many of the most vicious criminals, Switchblade would be intellectually challenged piling brush.

"Mussolini," I corrected him. "Ned Mussolini—a common name in Italy.

We convinced him that half the population of Italy was named Mussolini and that everybody would be looking for a U.S. passport but nobody would suspect he'd have an Italian passport.

"Maybe so. But I don't know nothin' bout Italians."

Swine stood outside by the passenger door. "I could give you some pointers," he said.

"You don't know nothin' about Italians," I threw in, wanting to get the show on the road.

"Sure I do," said Swine. "I watch De Luca at the poolroom. All you got to do is say chow a lot and wave your arms around when you talk."

"For Chrissake, can we get going?" Wad interjected from the back seat. "We need to go to the hospital first."

Switchblade put the knife to my stomach. "We're goin' to the airport, or we ain't goin' nowhere."

We went about six blocks in silence before Switchblade discovered there was no photo in the passport.

"It's okay," I told him. "I got a Polaroid camera back at my place. We can make our own passport photo. It's not far from the airport expressway."

I had a plan.

A little farther down the road, Switchblade asked, "What's that stinkin' smell?"

That stinkin' smell was the raw garlic in my shirt pocket making my eyes water. It obviously wasn't going to bail me out of this, so I pitched it and blotted my eyes on my sleeve. About that time we came upon the turmoil at Omar's Liquor Store.

I've seen jumpers on high buildings and bridges and hostage situations, but I never seen nothing like the hodgepodge jamming the corner at Omar's. Talk about over-reaction.

Metro cops and sheriff's deputies were manning the detour at Omar's corner. Also in evidence were animal control personnel, several ambulances, a local hook-and-ladder truck, and about five hundred other people. The cop directing traffic stopped us at the intersection to allow traffic to move from the other direction. Switchblade fidgeted nervously beside me. I spotted the old derelict who did the mop job on the raccoon.

When it was our turn again, I jammed the Mustang into gear and hit the accelerator. The result was a thud and a clang. Several important components of the transmission clattered to the pavement. The Mustang stopped suddenly. Tiny and this gang had obviously been too much for her. I'll never use garlic again—it's absolutely worthless. Besides, it really stinks things up.

The old wino was standing in the midst of a group of cops and several guys with *A.T.F.* for Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms on the back of their jackets. When the old bum spotted me in the traffic, he cut loose.

*"DERE HE IS!* He da one what let dat raccoon loose. Dat's him—right dere in dat puke-green convertible."

All this knocked hell out of my plan of getting Switchblade alone in my office where I could break his knife arm.

Four or five of the representatives from the various agencies surrounded the Mustang with hands on their weapons. One of the metro cops motioned to me. "You! Out of the car . . . on the hood . . . spread 'em." God I hate those Chinese guys and their jabberin'.

While leaning on the hood, well spread, I watched with fiendish amusement as the cop on the passenger side did his job.

"You got any I.D.?" the cop asked Switchblade.

"Chow," says Switchblade, saluting the cop.

"What?" says the cop. "Let me see your driver's license."

"I ain't got one. I'm Italian."

"What's your name?"

Switchblade pulled out the Italian passport and opened the front cover. "Ned Muss-o-leenee," he read.

The cop drew his weapon and stuck it in Switchblade's face. "Get out of the car, Mr. Muss-o-leenee." Switchblade complied. Being merely stupid, not insane, he deemed it advisable to drop his knife on the Mustang's floorboard.

While Wad was producing his I.D., one of the cops was prodding Tiny. "Hey!" said the cop. "This fat guy's dead."

At this point I need to explain to you about the private cop business. Bringing in Tiny was not one of those dead-or-alive deals. If you bring them in dead, the best you can hope for is a misdemeanor, transporting a corpse without a license. That's two thousand dollars or thirty days. In my case they added sixty days for aiding and abetting a known felon—not Tiny,

Switchblade. After considering all the mitigating circumstances, they decided to let me keep my P.I. license, and they would allow me to serve the ninety days on consecutive weekends if I agreed to plead guilty to the charges.

I had little choice. As luck would have it, my attorney Ordway Crook, with whom I could run a tab, was down at the end of my cellblock serving time for contempt of court.

The bitterest pill was yet to be swallowed, so to speak. Swine wrote up his own entry for the Kentucky Best Bourbon contest. He used the grandfather in the urn bit that I had put forth in jest. Not only did

Swine win the contest with his sappy entry, but Kentucky Best Bourbon decided to put Swine on their label holding the urn. And it gets better. They want him to do a TV promo showing him, with urn in hand, scattering his granddaddy on the track at Churchill.

Because my sentence was to be served on consecutive weekends, the first Saturday in May will find me in the slammer. Since I couldn't go with him, Swine decided to take Wad to the Derby. Now, if you examine the events as they have transpired you will understand how much damage jabberin' can do to you.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

# THE LOST CONTINENT



Geoffrey Household

**A**tlantis? It's of more interest to poets and mystics than to archaeologists. The lost continent is only a fable. We have no proof; you're looking at the best there is. No, not me. In the case behind my desk.

A puma, you think? Have you just been to the zoo? Well then, why do you call it a puma rather than a lion or a leopard? Yes, you're quite right. One could swear it was dug up in Peru or Ecuador. But an ivory puma is impossible. No pumas in the Old World. No elephants in the New World.

I'll tell you its history, though I warn you it is very unsatisfactory. It has no ending. You go out where you came in. You'll just say to hell with me and Jim Hawkes and all those visionary swordsmen who conquered the Americas and carefully destroyed or displaced every blessed thing they ought to have preserved for us.

But like all good stories it is really that of a man's character—a grubby little man with bad teeth and no education who cared as little for money and as much for truth as any dedicated scholar rediscovering the past for the wages of a manual worker.

At first Jim Hawkes was not allowed in when he turned up at the side door of the museum and asked to see me. They thought he had samples in his little bag. That was what he looked like—a salesman peddling cheap pens on commission. Yet there was something honest and earthy about him which was hard to distrust. He was a real Cockney, too—with the Londoner's genius for summing up doormen and minor officials and getting his own way in spite of them.

While he remembered to be on his best behavior, he addressed me as "sir." When he got excited, he called me "guv'nor." At that first interview he sensibly gave a thumbnail sketch of his background before coming to business, but I can't distinguish between what he said then and all I learned about him later. It's enough that he had passed twenty years of peace and war as steward on a tramp steamer, married a Portuguese wife, and settled down on her little farm in the Azores. He was one of those Englishmen who consciously loathe industrial civilization. Most of them haven't the enterprise to get out until they are tied to it. But Jim Hawkes knew an opportunity when he saw one. And the sea had already accustomed him to exile.

Introductions over, he asked me if I believed in Atlantis. He used the right word. It's a matter of belief, not scholarship. I told him gently that we believed in nothing without proof.

"Here it is," he said.

He opened his bag, scattering straw all over the room, and put that ivory puma on my desk.

It was like nothing I had ever seen. So far as technique and material



went it might have been a superb Persian ivory of the sixth or fifth century B.C., possibly brought to the Azores by the Carthaginians. But the style was wrong. Too realistic.

I remember thinking it odd that such a marvelous craftsman at carving ivory in the round had been unable to reproduce the strength and majesty of the lion. I know lions. In art, that is. Remind me to give you a copy of my monograph, "Treatment of the Conventional Mane."

"It's not a lion," Jim Hawkes said. "I think it's a puma."

I made no comment. I took him across to the American Section and put his ivory alongside our two pre-Inca pumas—one in stone and one in pottery. Jim Hawkes had a case.

When we were sitting down again in my office, I asked him how he had got hold of such a curiosity, rather suspecting that he would tell me some unbelievable yarn to cover up the fact that he hadn't any right to it. But no. He was eager, falling over himself, to invite questions. That was why he had come.

He told me that on the island of Graciosa he had discovered a shallow cave with its entrance nearly hidden beneath subtropical vegetation. The floor—part earth, part fine dry dust—was completely undisturbed. On a rock ledge at the back of the cave was standing the ivory puma.

He thought at first that it was a child's toy. For all I know, it may have been—though an ivory as large as a half-grown kitten argues a very high level of civilization in the nursery. Then he realized that it did not belong to our day at all, and his mind at once jumped to Atlantis.

But it would be wrong to think of him as just one of those lost-continent-cum-flying-saucer sort of cranks. His hobby—and I can't think of a better for anyone living in the Azores—was Atlantis. He knew all the usual arguments for and against. Like so many seamen he was a great reader though he had left school at the age of twelve. And he had a passion for facts. I tell you; he saw the difference between fact and conjecture much more clearly than some of my colleagues.

"What I want, Mr. Penkivel, sir," he said, "is to 'ave that cave excavated proper like. Not treasure 'unting! Every cupful of soil sifted by them as knows what's what. And I don't want nothink out of it for meself—and I'll pay the labor."

I asked him why me. Simple. He had turned up at the museum and demanded the bloke who knew most about ivories. Just possibly I am. But I also happened to be the bloke whom the porter was most annoyed with at the moment.

Now I really must repeat that there is no conclusive evidence for the existence of Atlantis. But as well as a so-called expert in ancient art, I am also a Cornishman. Part of us always dips into the ocean with the sun. So when I had taken Jim out to lunch next day and again convinced

myself that he was dead straight, I decided I might as well spend the six weeks' holiday which was coming to me in running a trial trench through that cave. I did not tell my colleagues what I intended. They would have thought I needed a holiday even more than I really did.

Like all islanders Jim knew how to travel cheaply. When he returned to the Azores on a Portuguese cargo boat, I went with him—feeling self-consciously precious and wondering to what sort of society I had condemned myself.

I needn't have worried. Jim's background was in keeping with the man—simple and satisfying. He had a white single-storied peasant house, three acres of wheat and pasture, and some terraces of fruit and vine that wandered up the hillside. It was one of the highest farms on Graciosa, blazing with sun or hidden under blowing mist half a dozen times a day and looking out over a full semicircle of empty, secretive Atlantic.

All this he had married, together with Senhora Hawkes. It was certainly a love match, though it wouldn't have been possible without her inheritance. Maria Hawkes was a peasant poppet with the face of an angel and the body of Humpty Dumpty. She too had got a bargain by her marriage. Her energetic little ex-steward, always wanting to know why, had doubled the value of her land. They had as yet no children. That allowed Jim his luxury of Atlantis. His excuse for the journey to London had been a visit to his brother, but the senhora knew as well as I did that his true motive was to explain the ivory.

His cave was on a steep, overgrown hillside, high above their land. The entrance was a horizontal cleft under an overhang of rock, so that it could be seen only by a man climbing up from below, and even then he might not spot it through the bushes for what it was. Beyond the cleft was a roomy, low-roofed chamber which ran back into the hill for seventy feet, narrowing all the way, until the passage ended at a fallen boulder.

It was just the sort of place to have sheltered early man. But the islands were uninhabited when the Portuguese discovered them, so I could not expect to find traces of anything larger than a rabbit. If I did, the historians and geographers would have a good deal of rewriting to do. That was a fascinating thought for a holiday, let alone the fact that I might come across another inexplicable ivory.

I don't normally dig; it's my job to give my opinion of what others have dug. But the cave would have been easy even for an amateur. Right inside, where Jim had made his find, there was only a layer of dust over the bedrock. We sifted all of this. It was quite sterile. I could trust him absolutely with the sieve. When I tell you that he managed to spot a rat's tooth, you can imagine how keen he was.

Over the rock at the entrance were eight feet of soil, shallowing rapid-

ly, of course, as one got farther into the cave. Through this we drove our trench with the help of two laborers whom Jim had hired. Meanwhile Maria Hawkes brought up enormous meals of fish and wine on a donkey and loaded the panniers with earth from our dig to put on her pineapples. She couldn't understand our professionally slow, patient progress. But if that was how her man wished to amuse himself she did not complain. Other wives had to put up with drink or gambling.

For the first week I was as happy as any fellow let out of an office can be. At the end of the second week I began to get bored. So did the on-lookers, who left us for good. We found not a trace of man. The authorities are always right. A pity—except when I am the authority myself.

The only excitement came when one of our cross trenches hit charcoal only two feet above the bedrock. Jim Hawkes was bursting with expectancy and quite silent. He saw what it could mean. So did the laborers. But I had to tell them there was no evidence of a human hearth; it was undoubtedly blown debris from a forest fire. I think I shall go out and look at it again.

Jim wouldn't let me pay for anything, and I knew he could not afford to go on. The farm was being neglected; ready money was short after his trip to London; and dear Maria Hawkes had added to the expense by considering it her duty to feed the spectators as well as us. At the end of the third week I persuaded Jim to give up and dismiss the laborers. I felt like—well, like a doctor telling him he must lose his leg. But it had become quite obvious that excavation was not going to tell us anything of the ivory puma.

When the first idle day was over—idle for me—I scrambled up to the cave and, of course, found Jim already there. He had been up before dawn and hoeing ever since, but now he was chipping away with a cold chisel at the boulder which blocked the end of the passage.

"Know anything about explosives, guv?" he asked.

I said I did. Not a very likely trade for an antiquarian. But in the war I was a sapper.

"Then 'ow about it? Think we'd be muckin' up the evidence?"

Yes. That was what he said. He had the instincts of a born archaeologist.

I told him I was sure there was no evidence to muck up but that the boulder would take some smashing. It had fallen from the roof recently. Say, two or three hundred years ago. To judge by the narrowing of the cave walls, I decided nothing much could be behind it except a cleft or vent. That had to be there, for an occasional draft of warmish air could be felt at floor level. The air had removed my last, faint doubt of Jim's story. It accounted for the preservation of the ivory—otherwise rather unlikely in the moist climate of the Azores.

There was a wide crack down the middle of the boulder and a useful

cavity below it. Doubtfully I told Jim my requirements. They didn't bother him. He spoke very serviceable Portuguese and was popular everywhere. He was back the next evening with a keg of old fashioned gunpowder—excellent stuff for shifting rock—from the island's general stores, this time on my bill, and had got fuse and detonators free from the whalers.

He did not mention what we were doing, even to Maria—most women are inclined to be excitable in the presence of explosives—so we had complete privacy. I made a good job of it, although my main length of fuse turned out to be a lot faster than the sample I had cut. I'm not sure whether I shot out of that cave together with the blast or just before it.

When the smoke had cleared, Jim and I opened up the passage. Fortunately, as it turned out, the whole force of the explosion had been directed outward, showering debris onto our working floor, cracking the rock but disturbing nothing beyond it. We had still a couple of hours of work with pick and crowbar before we could reduce it to rubble and climb over.

To my surprise the cave had done all the narrowing it was going to do and continued as a very rough V-shaped passage. I am not enough of a geologist to be sure of its origin. A combination of earthquake and steam pressure, I think.

Keeping the beams of our flashlights as much on the untrustworthy roof as on the ground, we cautiously followed the tunnel until it ended at an appalling abyss in the volcanic rock. That was where the warm air came from. A steam-heated hell fed by the tricklings-in at sea level or below. We threw down boulders and heard not the faintest sound. The gap was too wide to jump but fairly easy to bridge.

While I was wondering if I could ever pluck up enough courage to cross the homemade bridge which Jim—I knew it—was going to insist on constructing, he gave a shout. He was lying on his stomach examining from a respectful distance the sheer edge of that terrifying drop. He pointed to what he had found. Two shallow grooves for the beams of a bridge had been chiseled out of the rock. Our flashlights showed two corresponding grooves on the opposite side of the chasm.

I have never been nearer to believing in a drowned continent. Who wouldn't in a place like that? I had quite unjustifiable visions of the very last of the inhabitants clinging to a barren peak which later became the green island of Graciosa and using the cave as their temple or treasure house. Nothing impossible about the rock cutting. Atlanteans, if they existed, presumably had chisels of bronze or obsidian.

Oh yes, I thought of that! I took some scrapings and dust home in an envelope. No trace of bronze or any metal at all. Not conclusive, but in favor of steel. Particles so tiny as those from a steel chisel would have

been oxidized and blown away on a breath. The microscope did show a glassy dust like a form of obsidian, but even my Cornish blood refuses to build on that. A thousand to one that it was a natural component of the rock.

Farm work went overboard again. Serious, this time. There was a sudden squall from the south which laid the heavy, overripe wheat. Maria wept, but Jim damned the weather and continued to square the ends of two twenty foot lengths of pine sapling with a shipbuilder's adz so that they would fit the channels. Onto these spars we nailed planks from the bottom of an old farm cart. The donkey was busy all day hauling timber up the slope.

By the next evening our bridge was ready. I don't believe we would ever have thrown it across the gap if not for Maria. She had a marvelous head for heights and just laughed at her husband, whose distaste for this beastly brink of nothingness was just as great as mine. But he was far more determined.

The roof of the passage was not high enough for us to stand the spars of the bridge in the grooves and lower the far end by ropes. So we mounted the near end on a pair of wheels and kept up the far end at an angle of forty-five degrees by pulling on a rope. Maria pushed this contraption forward, or acted as brake if we raised it too high. When we finally dropped the bridge into position, axle and wheels went over the edge. We never heard a sound after the first bounce.

Maria greeted the accident with a merry laugh. She was perfectly happy standing a foot from the edge—and after all, the old wheels weren't worth anything. She strolled about on the bridge with plump unconcern. Jim and I went over it on our hands and knees.

After a few yards the passage opened out into an irregular rock chamber too large for the beams of our flashlights to explore. The *senhora*, becoming the weaker sex again, remained at the entrance with a flashlight of her own. She didn't like that place at all.

Working our way round the walls, we had just decided that this was the end of the cave with no way out of it when Maria let out a piercing scream. She had sat down with her back against the rock and a pool of light in front of her to keep off the bogeys. She stretched out her left hand to make herself more comfortable and placed it on the face of a corpse.

We rushed across to her. The dead man was a Spaniard or Portuguese of the early sixteenth century. Body, clothes, and weapons were well preserved in the still, dry air. He was on his back, with arms crossed on his chest. He knew he had had it and laid himself down to die with dignity, trusting in the mercy of God. And there in the dust, undisturbed since his last unsteady steps, were the marks of his loose boots.

He had taken a sword or dagger thrust low down on the side of the throat. I should not have noticed the perforation of the mummified skin if the linen of his shirt had not been dark with dried blood.

It wasn't the expert, the scholar trained to facts and nothing but facts, who saw the vital bearing of a four-hundred-year-old murder on the problem of the ivory puma. It was Jim, of course—Jim with his passion for never destroying the record of the past through avoidable carelessness.

"We can find aht what 'appened, Mr. Penkivel, guv," he said "Spend a bit of time on it and we don't 'ave to be Sherlock 'Olmeses."

He was right. The pointed, rather feminine tracks, though the edges were blurred, were utterly unlike our own and told the story. Two men had crossed the chasm. Side by side they walked to the far right-hand corner of the cave. There the dust was thoroughly trampled and disturbed as if they had been removing something which they carried away. On their way back to the bridge the man walking a little behind had stabbed the other.

The murderer's footprints had been overlaid by ours, and were muddled anyway, but a set of clean impressions which we found pointing to the gap seemed unexpectedly deep and firm. My astonishing collaborator was not content with a "seemed." He measured the depth of the heelprints. No doubt about it at all. The murderer when he left the inner cave was weighed down by his comrade's burden as well as his own.

The movements of the other were equally clear. When he fell forward, he left impressions of his knees and body. About where his neck would have been, a patch of dust was caked by blood. Badly wounded or dying, he had then risen to his feet, staggered to where Maria nearly sat on him, and crossed his hands on his breast.

You see why. Because the trusted companion who had stabbed him from behind made doubly sure of him by destroying the bridge. So he lay down to wait for the end. No weeping and cursing on the edge of that uncrossable abyss for him. His simple act made me understand the contemporaries of Cortés and Pizarro as no books could. Probably he had the sense to see that the sword had been merciful, that he hadn't long to live. Even so, I think that if the corpse had been mine it would have been found on the brink of the chasm with arms outstretched and mouth open.

I could now make a plausible guess at how the ivory puma came to be in the outer cave. The murderer, repacking his loot, had got rid of it as an object of no value and inconvenient bulk. But it pleased him. He was a man of the Renaissance. I like to think of him as an Italian. So he stood it on the rock ledge instead of just throwing it away.

We found no concrete evidence of what the valuables had been. Maria with her quick fingers helped us to sift the dust. Nothing. Not even a



spilt coin. But there was no need to drag in Atlantis. Boxes of gold and silver must often have gone astray in those days when the treasure fleets called at the Azores on their homeward voyage from the Spanish Main. The two adventurers, I suggested, could have been removing from the cave a hoard of stolen loot.

Jim did not deny it. He didn't stick to his lost continent. He merely pointed out, as modestly as the more courteous type of Oxford don, that I was ignoring inconvenient facts without explaining them.

"Ow about the footprints of the blokes what put it there?" he asked.

I hadn't thought of that. Obviously the prints of the blokes who put it there—whatever "it" was—were not visible at the time of the murder or they would be visible still. So in the sixteenth century they had already been obliterated by slow time. In that case the treasure had been put in the cave long before the Azores were discovered.

By now I was unconsciously treating Jim as an authority. I suspect that my voice echoed through the darkness in a genuine academic falsetto as I tried to answer his question by complicated theories involving drafts of air cut off by the fallen boulder. But I had to admit that the case for Atlantis could not be finally dismissed.

You would have thought he'd have jumped at it and driven home another point, too—that the chiseled footings we had found suggested a permanent bridge, not the casual construction which would have been thrown across the abyss by two fearless conquistadors hiding or seeking a hoard of loot.

Jim stuck to the evidence, however, and nothing but the evidence. He squatted on the floor sucking his teeth—and then he blew his own beloved Atlantis sky high. "Them two was puttin' somethink in," he said, "not takin' it aht!" And he fiddled around some more in the marks of the heels with flashlight and foot ruler.

He was onto the truth. The tracks which led from the entrance to the disturbed corner were deeper than the tracks which led back to the site of the murder. So there it was. The two men were putting something in. They did not find a treasure in the inner cave at all. They carried it in across their bridge and dumped it.

So far, so good—but if that was what really happened, the murderer had to return from his victim to the corner in order to pick up the two loads and make off with them. And his tracks must still be there.

They were. Along the wall all the way. That's why we had missed them. Reconstruction was easy. Torch or candle had gone out in the struggle, so the murderer felt his way back to the treasure round the wall. Wounded man also had a pistol—a very fine one for its date—which may have influenced the cautious movements of the other.

"Not what you wanted, Jim," I said. "I'm sorry. But you're a lot better off."

"Fifty-fifty, Mr. Penkivel, sir," he answered sternly.

I knew he must have noticed it. There was nothing his eyes missed, though, of course, he could not know the value of the emerald set in the pommel of the dead man's sword. Nor could I in the beam of a flashlight. But it was worth a lot for its extraordinary size even if flawed, as it almost certainly had to be.

I turned his offer down flat. In proportion to his resources Jim had contributed to an archaeological expedition more than any millionaire's fund ever dreamed of. He was entitled to the finds, if any. And then that amazing man reflected doubtfully, "Would yer say we 'ad the right to take it aht, guv? We're 'ere for knowledge, not treasure 'unting."

I assured him that there were plenty of sixteenth-century swords in the world and that this was of no special value except for the emerald set roughly and strongly into the hilt. Safest place to keep it, I suppose.

Well, yes, I must admit it was a superb weapon. But I wanted Jim to have the emerald, and I didn't know enough about the Portuguese law of treasure trove to be sure that if he produced sword and emerald as they were he would be allowed the value. Take it from me—state museums don't like paying out when they can get something for nothing.

"Okay, guv'nor," he said. "Sell it for me when yer gets 'ome because I wouldn't know 'ow. And you 'ave the ivory puma for the museum."

Why isn't it on exhibition? I've told you. Because the blasted thing is impossible! It asks us to assume a lost culture with affinities to both Old World and New. Yes, naturally I had it dated by the radiocarbon method. The very large elephant which supplied the ivory died not later than 2000 B.C.

Origin unknown. All we can say. Nothing surprising in that. Every great museum has some lovely thing in the basement waiting for the day when our successors will know enough to be able to label it.

There was nothing else in the cave worth recording. Jim and I decided to leave the body where it was and remove our bridge. Like a couple of idiots we talked of cementing a ring bolt into the roof so that we could support the far end while we pulled it back. Maria's feminine common sense soon dealt with that.

"But why not drop it down the hole?" she asked in her lilting Portuguese. "We can always make another."

It's the end of the story. Unsatisfactory, as I told you, except for Jim. I got him six thousand pounds for the emerald.

The chiseled bridge footings? Oh, those! Well, the romanticist—that's me—finds them so inexplicable that he is reexamining (please keep it to yourself!) the case for Atlantis. The coldblooded authority—that's Jim—suggested that our two adventurers made a solid bridge because they intended at some later date to bring over a heavy mule train of stuff which they did not want to risk losing.

Possible, but odd. Remember they only entered the inner cavern once. They never explored it at all while they were building their bridge or afterward. They carried in their mysterious loot straightway and dumped it. Doesn't that look as if the bridge was already there?

And doesn't it suggest a sudden, hasty decision, not the behavior of men stacking away valuables in a carefully chosen hiding place? My own guess is that they found the cave and the treasure at the same time. They didn't know what to do with such wealth, how to ship it and dispose of it. So they agreed to carry it into the inner cave for the moment and perhaps break down the bridge.

Where did they find it? In the outer cave, of course, where it had remained untouched ever since it was abandoned by desperate refugees from the sunken cities of the plain on the lost continent of Atlantis.

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### **SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED":**

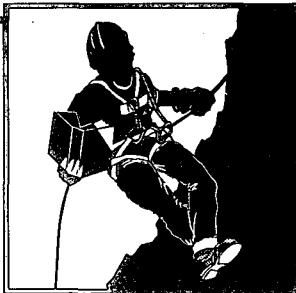
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In Miami, the following syndicate franchises were held: Alfie Giordano, cocaine; Benny Jacoby, prostitution; Carlo Fanchetti, gambling; Danny Harbino, extortion; and Eddie Ignacio, marijuana.

| NAME            | HOME        | N.Y.C.  | DET.    | S.F.    | CHI.    | MIAMI   |
|-----------------|-------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Alfie Giordano  | New Orleans | prost.  | gambl.  | extor.  | mar.    | cocaine |
| Benny Jacoby    | Kansas City | extor.  | mar.    | gambl.  | cocaine | prost.  |
| Carlo Fanchetti | Mobile      | cocaine | extor.  | mar.    | prost.  | gambl.  |
| Danny Harbino   | Omaha       | mar.    | prost.  | cocaine | gambl.  | extor.  |
| Eddie Ignacio   | Los Angeles | gambl.  | cocaine | prost.  | extor.  | mar.    |

# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



**B**arbara Hambly is talented at recreating the New Orleans of the early nineteenth century, the milieu of her protagonist Benjamin January, who was born a slave but is now a free man. **Sold Down the River** (Bantam, \$23.95) is the fourth book in this acclaimed series. January, formerly a Paris physician—he is presently a music teacher and concert musician—reluctantly agrees to return to the plantation home of his birth disguised as a slave and in the company of its cruel owner, all in a desperate search for justice. Hambly has a keen eye for period detail, a discerning ear for dialect, and a sure hand for storytelling with heart-stopping suspense and harrowing action. Readers who enjoy historical mysteries will long for the next foray into Benjamin January's world.

Nathan Walpow reprises his engaging amateur sleuth Joe Portugal in **Death of an Orchid Lover** (Dell, \$5.99), the second in his horticulturally inspired series. Joe earns a modest living doing TV commercials, blithely spending much of his free time pottering about in his suburban L.A. garden with his beloved succulents and sharing tips and plants with the like-minded folks in his cactus club. While attending an orchid show at a private estate with his best friend, the bisexual Gina, Joe meets two women who may end the drought Joe thinks of as his love life. When one of them is accused of murdering the party's wealthy host, Joe can't resist her appeal to help clear her name. Lots of orchid lore and a peek into the not-so-glamorous lives of TV commercial actors are part of the fun, but Joe's wry sense of humor will convert readers into loyal fans.

If you're looking for a complex, mesmerizing legal thriller, look no further than Marianne Wesson's **A Suggestion of Death** (Pocket, \$23.95). Hoping to boost business for her small private practice, Boulder attorney Cinda Hayes makes an appearance on a local radio talk show. A young voice calls in with questions regarding a possible crime only now being revealed as she explores repressed memories. Thus be-

gins Cinda's involvement with a sad young woman, the daughter of a local politician. The car accident that drowned the child's mother, a secret militia meeting that ended in death in a barn, and a harrowing picture of "white legs" that seems to smack of sex and violence—these are the jumbled memories in Drew McKay's befuddled brain. Drew is certain that incidents in her childhood have contributed to her suicidal depression and that only the truth will set her free. Cinda only needs to unearth enough of the truth before the statute of limitations runs out. Wesson draws great characters and builds an exciting, complex tale liberally spiked with legal lore.

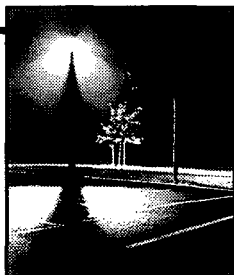
Noreen Wald opts for a breezy first person narrative in her New York series starring professional ghostwriter Jake O'Hara. In **Death Comes for the Critic** (Berkley, \$5.99) there are plenty of suspects when a vituperative book critic for a snazzy Manhattan magazine is literally stabbed in the back. Add Jake's cop boyfriend, her New Age bookstore proprietor mom, her mom's psychic medium friend, and Jake's own group of recovering ghostwriters, and you have a whole bevy of unlikely sleuths to snoop out a killer. Don't look for credibility here; if you can't relax and enjoy the ride, skip this one entirely.

Nancy Pickard, winner of both the Macavity and Agatha awards for her established cosy series, brings her skills to the thriller genre with spectacular results. In **The Whole Truth** (Pocket, \$22.95), Floridian Marie Lightfoot is a bestselling true crime author covering the trial of a young local accused of abducting, murdering, and brutally mutilating the body of a small deaf girl. All the evidence points to Raymond Raintree, a strange, silent man with obvious mental problems and a past shrouded in mystery. Pickard has created a very sympathetic protagonist in Lightfoot, whose search for some answers in her own family history are left unresolved as she digs deeper into Raintree's past. Inevitably she sparks a reaction from a twisted and devious killer long experienced in eluding justice (but who never steals the spotlight away from the good guys in the book). Memorable characters, plenty of plot twists, and several exciting action sequences add to this fresh look at Florida. Pickard has written a thriller with delicacy and compassion, with no sacrifice to the story's suspense.

San Antonio's District Attorney Chris Sinclair is shocked into a full stop when he passes a forensic lab technician cradling a plaster head modeled on a recently unearthed corpse. In the model he sees the face of the irrepressible girl he loved one year in college, whose disappearance ended Sinclair's brief period as a wild thing. Thus begins Jay Brandon's **Afterimage** (Forge, \$23.95), a twisty tale of love and betrayal, family ties and vengeance, and secrets kept too hidden for too long. The novel has a nifty opener and some exciting moments both in and out of the courtroom.

# THE STORY THAT WON

The January Mysterious Photograph contest was won by John Thomen of Katy, Texas. Honorable mentions go to Virginia Thompson of Alameda, California; B. Jackson of El Cajon, California; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Kay Mirza of Arlington, Tennessee;



David A. Rooney of Natick, Massachusetts; Steve Plummer of Wichita, Kansas; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; Ric Mann of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada; Robin Miller of Temagami, Ontario, Canada; and Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia.

Chip Forelli

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## DETECTIVE DAN'S DILEMMA by John Thomen

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It was dark—and deadly quiet. His brain was rhythmically being pressed and released. In . . . and out. And again. His face tensed with each throb. He tried to stretch out but couldn't. His legs were cramped. His neck was stiff. His back ached. All of this and thirty years of dealing with crime told Detective Dan Martin that something foul was afoot. He could smell it, along with dirty carpet and a dank, rubber odor.

He struggled and finally put his eye to the one pinpoint of light coming in to him. He was inside! Through this hole was outside.

As his vision cleared and his eyes adjusted to the brilliant, painful light coming off of the spaceship, Martin made out a basketball goal. Vandalism! But the aliens hadn't harmed it. Next was a small tree glowing like the leaves were on fire. Assault! Zapped by alien rays of some sort. No . . . more likely, the tree just reflected the ship's intense light. Maybe they took all of the people?

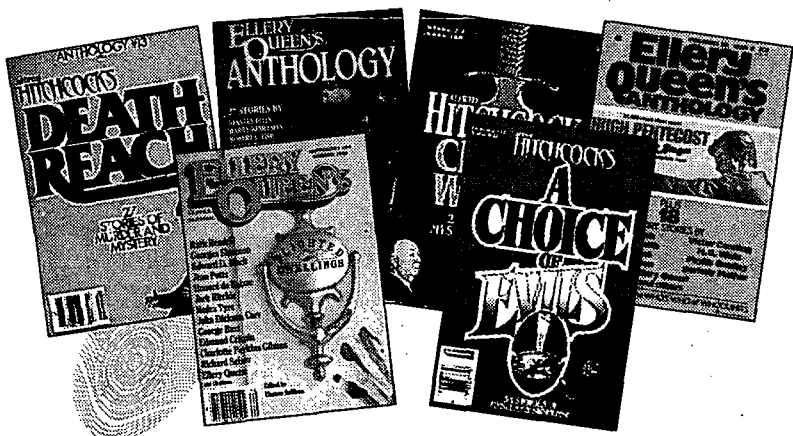
Then fraud came to mind. Why? Why fraud? Of course! The aliens were only a streetlight. They had deceived him. But he sensed that some of the elements of fraud were missing. He circled his head around, trying to relieve the aching.

He was more sure than ever that a crime had been committed. But still, with all of his experience, from his vantage point, bound up in the trunk of the car, he could not detect a crime.



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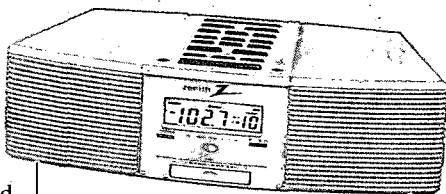
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